

Kestrel

by

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The Kestrel Waiverly Novels
{A Diary of a Future Time}

“Man will become better when
you will make him see what he is like.”
Chekhov.

Part I.
Introduction

There's no such thing as just a novel. There's always more to it than itself. Each book is not merely what is said but what is perceived. As such a book if given to two people is not the same book even if all words are identical one to another.

For it is within the self that language, thought and memory take hold.

As such the geography of every book and every word is not condensed to a single point.

But is infinite.

The only communion from life to life lay not merely in one's language but one's experience.

All those things one knows, intimately in the dark, another knows, the shadows of fear and hate and love. And grief.

Even without word or speech, they are written intimately in the blood.

As such there is no such thing as just a novel.

There is only a life condensed far enough into the dimension of a shadow of a thought that others perceive and attempt to understand. But much of what they read is but the reflections of their own lives cast back strangely in the dark.

For this reason, the number of words will never end, not till all the stars in the skies have bled away, and even then, some aspect of life might linger on.

Even then . . .

Prologue

I.

Imagine a killer coming from another world. He existed before in a state of extreme confinement, his very skin encased neath armour, his world a series of corridors and rooms and words like “sky” or “ocean” as alien as a colour one has never seen.

Our killer let loose does as his name suggests, and is sentenced. However.

Putting such a killer in confinement would simply grant him a return to his former state. To put him behind bars, to seal him away forever would do no more justice than allowing him freedom.

And so paradoxically the only way to punish the killer is to set him free.

His armour was removed, his naked skin now in contact with the alien air.

His rooms were abandoned, his flesh taken not to a prison of high walls, not the confinement of small chambers like the hidden countries inside an ammonite shell but rather a wide-open field.

And released him into this.

Our killer, now limitless, now given the emptiness of a field, the touch of cool grass, sun brilliant like a black eye overhead, screams. He screams, a sound so glaringly horrifying even those who sentenced him shake their heads in pity, in sympathy, even despite what he had done.

The family of the victim, of the young woman taken at the flood of the killer’s anger, watch. Her husband watches the killer confined by nothing but a single field stretching across countless miles in all directions. Her son watches, her daughter watches.

As the killer screams.

Is an hour enough? A day? Could a day be enough?
Would a day have been less horrifying than a year, or two, or
twelve or twenty? A day was deemed enough and the killer by
day's end returned to his armour and promised thus.

Should he in any way violate the law he would not return
to the small chambers of his homeland nor be buried in stone nor
sentenced to the fields but instead the desert, a place so empty the
very word knotted wickedly inside him at the hearing of it.

And the killer never killed again.

Was this justice?

I cannot tell.

Were all aliens like this?

No. For it was not humanity that decided this punishment.
His own people did, or at the least, implied.

Had he been sentenced only by human minds he would
have spent forever inside a sea of stone . . .

Content.

II.

The story does not mention what this Earth was like. It
mentions field and desert and husband and wife, son and
daughter, man and woman, but beyond this, nothing else is
revealed save this and the alienness of others too. There is no real
mention of politics here though there is mention of justice and
prisons and walls, assuming somehow justice is made of prisons
and walls.

But most significantly there is no mention of her.

There is no mention of the woman taken at the flood of an
alien's rage.

It is said she was young. Young compared to what, to
whom? She had two children but their ages are not mentioned.
She was married but was their marriage bliss or despair? What
was she like as a wife, as a mother? I have given no details here.

I have not described her race, or her appearance, and have given no insight into any necessary detail of who she was.

And this is by design.

Once I make her defined, once I give shape to her then to someone somewhere she is no longer what she was. I limit down the number of things she could be to the number of things I say she was until one woman etched into a story becomes instead one piece of a woman, defined and shortened and limited, and denied.

You will notice also I have not revealed what the alien looked like, giving no more detail than that he wore armour, though even this, beyond the word "armour" I have not defined. Even his appearance is likewise unknown.

And what of his emotional state?

Two points in his life revealed, his murder of another and the punishment of himself. It is said he never killed again but that is all that is shown and known. Behind the armour he could have seethed forever, his morality merely forced on him by fear or even the murder itself could have been nothing more than an accident, a momentary lapse of rage, or fear.

What have I revealed about him beyond two emotions and the armour of his body? *Nothing*. I have revealed nothing.

This too is by design.

Imagine a place populated only by beings all wearing masks, all hidden away inside the garments of their bodies, all appearing identical and yet all alien to each other. And now imagine how one might punish, reward, understand or hate one another.

There could only be one way of course.

To tear off their masks and become the objects of the other which they seek to punish or reward or understand.

Or hate . . .

Chapter 1

Women's country

Imagine a knife.

Imagine a sharp serrated blade perfectly balanced of pure steel, sharp enough to slice one's hand open with the merest pressure.

Imagine this thick-bodied blade was crafted perfectly as a weapon of war, designed to survive the rain, and the heat of a fire, to be shatterproof and to never dull. One could crush it neath a carriage wheel or throw it point first into a solid stone wall and no matter what the blade would remain infinitely deadly.

How might such a blade be used?

How might such a thing of teeth be used?

Eventually, all thoughts would turn to violence.

Eventually, whether through accident or design such a thing as this would exist to shed blood, to take something living from the living lands.

Even if only used to butcher animals, even if only used to kill another living being for food still violence would cling to it like a cancerous shroud.

But in Agaliarept such a thing as this would have only one purpose.

But to be a thing of art.

One would notice the hilt perfectly grey streaked of fire-scarlet dye, left under glass like a pinned butterfly, the artist mentioning she stumbled upon the idea of it by examining knives already used, dull pieces incapable of cutting flesh and simply extrapolating from this something truly creative.

But if one told her, wendigo-like the true potential she would deny it. She would argue no one would ever use a thing to harm another. It simply didn't happen here.

And what is more, the artist would be right.

The land was called Thascalios. Agaliarept was one of the largest cities if not the largest city in all the world. It clung to the shores of a great river known simply as The River since no other rivers existed across the entire land and giving a second name to the same thing twice made no sense to anyone at all.

The city swam of concrete, cement, and steel. Some buildings seemed infinitely vast, occupying two storeys or more. They were beyond opulent, many going so far as to have toilets or running water, a miracle of rare device.

The people were healthy and happy and there had only been a plague here a few months before. Only a few hundred had died, leaving many to celebrate their good fortune in so few taken.

One could peer into the homes of each family.

Women dominated here.

For each son born, there were ten daughters. One would observe a mother tending her broods literally, for in Agaliarept it was not uncommon for four daughters to be born during a single pregnancy.

One could observe in small gas-lit rooms women tending their daughters and their son, feeding them, changing them while husbands or suitors would go forth, moving between their homes and their other homes, each assigned four families to become a part of. A man would enter one domicile, his purpose to help any way he could and then to move on to the next, and the next, his rounds rendered to a clocklike perfection.

And all the time he would listen and tell stories, change the children, feed them as well knowing each moment was a precious country he could dwell and be exiled from, moving steadily, his rounds ground to a sure perfected state of things.

And in gas-lit rooms upon scarlet couches sitting before fireplaces, the mothers would come together, hands intimately embracing one another. And sometimes, only sometimes would

they let the suitors come and join them.

Afterwards, the suitor would be allowed to stay by nightfall, his home, his bed, his room changing always, schedule settling in, the mothers in the other room. *Together*. It was the way of things.

From out the rooms, if one could pass down through corridors and streets they'd come to museums and libraries and the hidden depositories of the older things.

If one could let slip their fingers across atlases and globes in dim-lit rooms before fossils of giant beetles and hallucinogenic shapes they'd notice Agaliarept's position in the world.

To the west was the forest of withered trees and to the east Temsla and the desert of salt and glass, to the north the Inner Sea and the islands, and far to the south the world's edge, Ixenlira and Irenlira and the Antarctic shore below.

All of this was deemed the entire world.

And passing from the atlases embedded under glass one could walk among frozen forms of giant extinct creatures from before, insects in primordial jungles, or elephants. Or dogs.

And one would imagine such things as these must have only occupied the same ground one's own feet had tread upon.

In all the city and all the cities beyond and the small villages and towns, (or at least in those places governed by Agaliarept,) the same patterns slowly emerged, the same slow recall of days and schedules and broods to tend to and never once a fear of a violent act.

Such things just simply didn't happen here.

Though one could still die. One might find a family dead during the night, the gas a poison seeping through their sleeping bones. And the plague, yes, the plague could kill. Or one could fall from a great height, almost thirty feet, and this too could cause

the ending of one's life.

But violence against another never happened here.

A mother would trust a stranger as easily as herself.

If a child accidentally escaped into a street, a small body in a thin white dress slouching toward the other side of the road and she was picked up by anyone, man or woman, and gone for four days, the mother would have as little fear of this as if she had been gone a moment.

Eventually, she would be returned unharmed with a simple explanation that the person who found the girl could get no word as to where her home was so he or she had simply added her to their number for a time, feeding them, clothing them, and tending to them and now at last all had finally been made well.

As an added point said saviour would then leave one of his or her daughters behind for four days to tend and clothe as a simple means of repayment for the room and board the lost child accrued.

And the reunited parent would accept and that would be that.

As such though there was crime the name meant something subtler here. A crime after all was merely another word for a misunderstanding.

If two women noticed the same garment upon a cart and both reached for it at the same time to purchase it who owned the garment now and who did not?

If two women argued in the street loud enough for someone else to hear who was in the right and who the wrong, how could you prove this? It hardly mattered what the argument was about for any sign of antagonism was deemed a crime of sorts and deemed a misunderstanding since no one willingly sought to inconvenience another.

And there were officers for this of course, women who went on their rounds sometimes carrying a daughter or two with

them or would have them tag along, each woman wearing a uniform of blue, their bodies now a miniature ocean, or seeming so, passing then as a flood within a flood of bodies.

Their purpose was always the same, to diffuse a situation, and Agaliarept being the largest city in all the world had the largest rate of crime so it was deemed especially stressful to live here and deal with crime constantly, never knowing if a voice would be raised. Or someone's life would be slightly out of step.

Of course, the small villages beyond had a much simpler state of being. Why one, Elelogap comes to mind, only had twenty houses lined on each side of a lone road passing through and so crime there of course was something less than here.

Now one would imagine a city like Agaliarept, crime-riddled with the occasional argument, with children spending days in strangers' homes, with a certain threat of death from any way except a human hand, would be unnerving enough that one would want a paradise to come.

Some did.

One would find novels, pamphlets penned constantly decrying the decay that seemed about them now. The idea of someone fighting in a street, and concern over a lack of etiquette, seemed quite capable of driving one mad.

And what if some other city sent people marching toward them, hundreds of people coming toward Agaliarept from some other nation-state, marching in perfect rhythm and lockstep?

They would be horrified to see the decay of the occasional argument or worse might be offended if they were not all offered places to stay immediately. Of course, the idea of hundreds coming toward the city in lockstep would not be an army for the word did not exist here.

The only fear would be to offend one's guests or seem to send them away without showing the niceties one has.

As such one could always find further means to excise the

cancer of bad form and continuously improve to something better, where death would become not a word at all nor an idea, and grief of any kind would never be known.

Ah well.

Grief of any kind is always known.

At any rate, this was the city of Agaliarept and these were the people living in it. But one turned his steps from the city to the fields beyond, booking passage on a train, turning sad eyes behind him as he came . . .

Chapter 2

The twilight of terra

The man lit from the train by dawn's light. He watched it winnow past, trailing dragonlike down through fields of green, imagining it as some black centipede, each wheel a leg curled and ready to strike.

A billow of smoke roared along, trailing into dust behind the black train, and in the thought of the smoke was a taste of ash.

He grimaced and then turned, his dung-brown suit clinging to his body like an extra skin. In his hand was a suitcase, itself dung-brown, large, and blocklike.

The train station was nothing more complex than a small black building by the side of the tracks, little more than a one-storey house with windows where tellers sat waiting for people to come.

He passed the rows of women seated there, noting how empty the rest of the country seemed.

He alone had come from the train carrying the suitcase with thick fingers and blunted hands.

He struggled to unseat the thought of this and went down the stairs to where the road lay.

Then he started walking.

He was in Elelogap.

It was a small town composed of only twenty homes arranged along a single street. Each house was designed like a cottage with a rounded roof and windows where he could see old women sitting, listening to their radios.

The hotel was at the road's end and beyond the road's end a garden and beyond a garden the lake mirror replica of the Inner Sea.

At the front desk he mentioned his name to the woman

waiting, was given a key, and shown up the stairs to his room.

In his room he noted the bed, the chair, the desk and placed his suitcase upon the bed, waiting until she left, then opened it.

He then went over to the desk. It felt old, this thing on slender legs, this too-thin strip of wood expanded into an endless flat plain. He drew forth some paper and pen and began to write.

He tried to think of the right words but they wouldn't come.

His family had died long ago.

There had been a plague.

But he wrote the best he could, paused, put the iron-wood pen on the desk, went to the bed and its warm sheets the colour of autumn, carefully put the suitcase down, and lowered his head.

In his mind's eye he could see Agaliarept rising half a thousand miles away, could see spires in the distance and the river meandering through its flesh and in his mind's eye he listened, straining to hear it.

But it never came.

He heard no cry. Heard no scream. Knowing the future, knowing the hours to come he spent his time along the pathways of his past wandering streets laid down there in his mind. Carts and horses skimmed streets of cobbled stone and all the buildings were struggled together turning Agaliarept into a single labyrinth whose paths one would have to know as intimately as one's flesh.

The man upon the bed imagined himself eating an apple in Agaliarept, not knowing when merely doing what once he did and now that memory bled to this moment here.

But there was no one to share such moments with.

Night crept on, both in the real and the country of his head, and he saw her, a woman in the square and with her another, both wearing golden faces like the faces of birds.

Imagine eyes of sapphire gazing outward into you,

imagine a short beak opening and closing, screaming words unintelligible as if expectant of you to know, and since you do not know they scream the louder, in defiance of you . . .

He opened his eyes staring at the white of the ceiling and slid his legs over the side of the bed, rising uncertain if he had slept or merely remembered sleeping then noticed through the window the sun had risen again.

He should have been hungry having not eaten in three days. Yet hunger would never lay hold of him again.

In his suitcase, he drew out the vial. In Agaliarept it had been easy to obtain. He cupped this in his hand imagining then those mocking hidden smiles, features etched on each person like a stele in wax and just as impersonal. His daughters' faces came to him, girls obliterated in a night and he struck the thought away and opened again his eyes.

His words he put carefully upon the desk then went out into the corridor, locking the door behind him, the vial nestled in the cup of his hand.

Then down the stairs, bidding the young woman good day, she asked if he wanted breakfast. He said no.

Then outside to the garden to his right.

There was a woman in the garden having a sandwich. She had pale skin and ice-blue eyes.

He sat beside her on a stony beach amid the trees' canopy and mentioned his name to her.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Kestrel Waiverly," she said.

He told her his name.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

He almost began to cry, stopping himself, she noticed as he drew the vial from his pocket, gazing at the black liquid carefully, the way a fly might gaze at amber boiling down a stem toward it, inches at a time. In the trees, a colony of cats was eying carefully her sandwich, the white bread and the meat within.

The man gazed up, noticing the mother-in-heat, the largest of the cats coloured white and brown, streaks of both staining her body. He imagined her yellow eyes were turned toward his own, imagining them the eyes of a woman he once knew, an animal understanding now between them. The nest was in the cup of the tree's branches, twigs and leaves put together to create a rat's nest for the young to dwell in before they gained strength enough to crawl along the ground.

"Are you alright?" she asked again.

He said no. Then he rose, walking slowly, steadily toward the lake. Not knowing if she would follow.

She did.

He arrived at the white picket fence separating the green from the sand and passed through a small gate between, she following, he turning finally toward her.

He said some last words about love and fear and hate. He tried to smile. Yes, he almost tried to smile. Then the last words caught wickedly inside him and he rambled about feeling himself a cockroach in a world of giants.

Before she could stop him, he drank the poison in front of her and stiffened as it began to take effect. Jaher-jrahel. Such a simple thing to acquire in Agaliarept. And as his eyes began to blacken and she began to call for help he imagined himself not here but back in the city of his birth about to open the door of his home, not noticing the sickly sweet scent of decay beneath the doorway until it was too late to turn and walk away . . .

Kestrel Waiverly sat beside the dead man until help arrived then sat upon the sand a time staring out into the lake, far shore of mist-shrouded ground barely seen.

His eyes were black by now. The poison had eaten into them devouring all other colour leaving hollow pits of empty places as if his entire life had been left as nothing but a husk, the

eyes most pronounced in showing this.

The woman who picked him up and took him away asked what had happened and she explained how he had sat and spoken to her and then walked away, she following out of an unnamed fear something was wrong with him.

Then this.

Then the dead was taken away.

After an hour or more, she rose, white dress clinging to her body like a second skin, suddenly terribly aware of the cold even amid a summer's day.

His face suddenly peered into her own.

She could see each sinew, each muscle of his face tightening, then the oddly blocklike face contorted and finally began to loosen as the poison took its hold upon his features till she was not staring at his face but at the features of the poison now. It was as if the poison wore him like a second skin across the body of itself.

She turned and went the way she came.

Elelogap had no place for autopsies.

Such things just didn't happen here.

Kestrel returned to work, to her office, and sat. She let her fingers slide upon the oaken desk, itself feeling centuries old as if time were but an illusion to the thing. The comfort of this eternity in an hourglass she longingly grasped for now.

She was smiling she knew, or seemed to.

It was a trick of biology. As she looked out at each woman typing their reports all had the selfsame smile as her even when they were not smiling at all.

Dr. Khuy entered her office, the grey demesne of faded wallpaper and ancient chairs, and sat.

"How are you?" she asked.

Kestrel said she didn't know.

"Did he say anything important before he . . .?"

He felt like a cockroach in a world of giants, she said.

"How are you holding up?"

I'm not, she said.

"The poison was the cause of death. We've found out who he is." She gave him his name to Kestrel.

I already know his name, she said.

"Yes, he told you. Of course. We've found where he was staying."

She asked where that was.

"The hotel, about fifty feet from where you met."

Dr. Khuy mentioned there was a suitcase found and a letter, addressed to no one. The good doctor handed the missive to her, Kestrel opened it and read.

The letter was about his family back in Agaliarept. He had found them together. That was his last memory of them.

But there was also written something else, something about women wearing masks of birdlike faces . . .

Kestrel didn't know what it meant.

"No one does really. He came all this way to die and no one knows why."

Because his family died, she said.

"Many have lost their families due to the plague. One merely starts again."

He had not been able to start again, she said.

Staring into his eyes she knew.

He could never have been able to start again . . .

Chapter 3
Crumpled is the
smile in my hand

Kestrel Waiverly awoke and noticed the time.

A small mechanical ticking like a cricket's voice was greeting her and then came the shrill cry of a sparrow in her room.

It was time to get up, the small machine said.

She stretched, slid her legs over the bed, and rose, standing before a lengthwise mirror. By now it had become routine, the empty room seemingly occupied by two Kestrels just before dreams fled and the real world became.

Then a shower, breakfast downstairs, her meal usually honey cake and bread. Staring out her window she could see Khuy's house and Khuy herself in her garden, nakedly tending the flowers.

By now Khuy had resolved to try anything to get Kestrel's attention.

Kestrel noticed olive-dark skin working, her back turned toward Kestrel's window and then the good doctor rose and went back into her cottage.

It wasn't a lack of interest on Kestrel's part though.

She was still grieving.

She had come from Agaliarept, or rather been forced to come. The nation of Ythriel, (of which Agaliarept was the capital,) had a policy of assigning officers to the small villages due to any tragedy they might have suffered. Half a year or more in the calm comfort of a small town was deemed better than continuing to work in the unending stress of the metropolis.

Kestrel's tragedy had been simply this.

The loss of her daughter.

Her daughter had accidentally wandered into the streets and before anyone could stop her a horse had hit her.

Had the doors been locked this would never have happened but in the capital like elsewhere none ever locked their doors nor did locks even exist. It was a technology they simply could not imagine.

So, her daughter at age five would never reach the age of six.

Rather than have her entire family move Kestrel herself was assigned here, had been here for a few months now, and in another few months perhaps she'd take Khuy up on her offer.

But not today.

The grief had lessened over time.

As she ate her meal slowly the previous day bled into the morning now. The last day was a crime involving children fighting over a toy. It was a doll two girls fought over and this had demanded an entire report.

For just the barest moment she imagined one of the girls was her daughter but slowly the ghost of this lessened over time.

Though the ache remained.

Her room was brightly lit, a white-golden glow suffusing everything including the table where her daughter's picture was.

Her other daughters, (she had fourteen,) were likewise scattered about the cottage, faces peering at odd angles and the father and other three women her daughters called mothers too.

But now, only this girl's face remained, alone, sitting on the table there. And every feature became the geography of a slowly ending pain.

She couldn't taste food for a while, rose, realizing the meal had ended ten minutes before, went to her front door and went outside.

The office was little more than another cottage with a basement. The other officers numbered four, or rather there was herself, Khuy and two others and that was it. Her morning was

spent on a report and then at midday she left, mentioning she was going to have her meal in the garden. And did.

Afterward, she walked the streets for a time. That loss she'd seen before, before devoured by the vial's cancer nestled in his hand.

Night came and she was not aware of it.

The village being a village was too small so one crossed the same streets again and again, the threshold of a moment relived again and again.

At some point Khuy noticed her and brought her back to her home, putting her on the couch while she took the bedroom upstairs.

In her mind's eye Kestrel imagined she was three places now. She was in her bedroom, she was on Khuy's grey soft womb of a couch but she was also back in the capital, her daughter's head lying on her stomach, Kestrel feeling her daughter's dark hair curled upon her skin.

Had she a way she would have preserved her daughter's voice but it was only left exile in her dreams now.

She understood him.

She awoke to realize her hand was to her lips as if trying to drink, the thing nestled in her hand small and delicate. Like a vial.

Still night she realized, turning in her half-awakened state.

The blankets she pulled over her head as if in a chrysalis.

She slept again, tears somehow refusing to flow.

Chapter 4

A paler shade of sky

Dr. Lucillea Khuy stood over Kestrel, watching her.

She awoke just on the cusp of dawn, the thought of the dead taken by its own hand still lingering in her soul. The act of watching Kestrel was little more than a momentary remembrance.

Khuy compared the living and the dead in her mind.

Then certain Kestrel was still among the living she went to her library on the second floor and began to read.

She often did this early in the morning.

She had travelled abroad, even visited Ixenlira and Irenlira, (merely passing through a day, imagining in the country of that day she knew everything there was to know,) and so had tomes from the various corners of the world.

Pushing the thought of the real away she returned to the imagined country someone else had designed.

Beyond the city lay large empty wastelands and between them lingered oceans of glass the colour of wine. The wastelands were the homes of strange and primordial things, beasts on spindling legs, thick-bodied like some arcane sigil . . .

Moths could be seen flying the air, their grey-bronze wings crafting vast shadows, etching them into the ground. One could follow the wind-rider's paths because the shadows of their wings did leave blunt scrapings like the footprints of old ammonite gods behind . . .

Other creatures swam here as well. One could watch serpentine forms struggling in the sand but when the bodies burst outward, upward they were not serpents but orchids. Usually, the shifting of their bodies could be seen but sometimes, only sometimes one would notice a subtler form. A woman would often be seen crossing the desert, or women, naked and appearing however one desired them.

Once one stepped upon the sands they would start to sink in the

fine dust sea and soon would come the women who were nothing more than appendages as they dragged the helpless into their maws, buried deep below the world's skin.

And was no more.

There were other creatures more terrible than this but seldom crueller, to spend one's last seconds struggling among those they remembered and lost, even in the recognition of their deaths crying out toward their murderers, "Don't you remember me?"

She closed the book and closed her eyes.

She tried to recall the bookshelves behind her, the tecum panelling, light pouring in through the upper window there. As she did she imagined the dead man inches from her face, his pale skin, his blackened eyes peering directly into her own closed eyes.

She opened them again. He wasn't there.

She continued reading of the desert beyond until she heard Kestrel awaken and move about downstairs.

They ate quietly then left, closing the door behind them, standing now in the manicured garden, an arch of greenery over both their heads. Almost Edenic. The cottage was rounded like a parapet half-formed or broken and then smoothed, becoming a new roof where once had been a floor.

They spoke little and went to their office.

They both knew what was about to come next.

One had no formula for this.

Kestrel stood before the body and merely gazed at it.

He was in the lowest section where it was coldest but it was no crypt.

They stored food here.

The poison chosen was quick and used to kill vermin in the capital. To kill insects. Death was instantaneous, nearly so.

He would be taken shortly and his body placed upon the pillars of course. Today was the day.

Outside the town the pillars lay, spires of stony flattened at the top, each large enough for five people to be placed upon them lying down.

The pillar was only eight feet high, high enough for the birds to come but no other thing to feast upon the dead.

Being poisoned the man might contaminate the birds but she was assured jahre-jrahel ceased being toxic in the blood after only a few days. It was designed to become harmless after its purpose was done.

She watched the dead man uncertain what to do next, having no words for what the man had done to himself here.

The word did not exist of what she observed.

Suicide.

She turned, expectant to see someone in the grey of the darkened room. But no one was there.

But there had come a word into her consciousness, a word never heard before.

Suicide.

Quietly she turned and went up the stairs . . .

The dead man was laid upon the pillar by midday.

Six women had come to collect him, all wearing the same uniform. Kestrel and Dr. Khuy were the only others in attendance. They watched as the man was carried upon the shoulders of the six, the pillar lowered mechanically to the ground, the body placed upon it and the pillar raised again. And then the birds came.

Small, blunt-beaked creatures, feathers, and wings the colour of grey bronze, eyes like dim sapphires, blue and black.

In two hours or three, the naked body would be divested of everything human but bones. In the distance colonies of cats could be seen, their yellow eyes staring at the feast denied them.

Kestrel stood, waiting, eyes closed. Khuy stood beside her, smaller, her bright olive skin an odd contrast to the winter pale of Kestrel's own. And yet their eyes were the same, ice-blue eyes that everyone had, except the dead man's now.

And soon his blackened eyes would be gone.

They waited, saying nothing, the other six gone. The sun crawled along the sky on its stomach like a beetle might and they waited until the sound of birds flustering and crying and screaming had fled then carefully lowered the dais to the ground and stared in mute shock.

Not even bones were left.

Nothing but the skull had survived.

Kestrel reached out for it but at her touch it dissolved away like a jellyfish in salt, recoiling and smoothing against the greying stone until she couldn't tell what was stone or flesh anymore. They had melted together into a grey oblivion.

Then the two went on to think about the dead, Dr. Khuy mentioning it was time for lunch.

"I'm not hungry," Kestrel Waiverly said.

After the funerary rites, Kestrel had gone to the garden, following the footsteps of the man. A book in hand.

"And in all the country and all the city and in each town when death occurred the hand behind that death was never a man's own or woman's.

One could die of accident injury or disease. One could die from a great height or plunging into the waters, tiring till one drowned. One could die of plague, of invisible passengers tearing at one's blood, but to die of one's hand or the hand of another . . .

Such things just didn't happen here.

And now for the first time in forever, a suicide had occurred. Death entered the world for the first time in the guise of a man . . ."

She sat and stared at the word. Suicide.

The passage was from a novel. The novel was a piece of fiction. And the word she had seen before she now finally could understand. It was as if some veil had peeled away from the sheen of her eyes. But the word had no meaning here. Yet the word existed.

She wondered how many other words she read before, never understanding their meaning until now. And all the time a subtle fear clutched at her. For if the word existed here so too did the thought behind it, a thought which no one ever had in all forever.

So where did this idea come from?

Chapter 5

Elephants' graveyard

Kestrel Waiverly had gone away a time.

After the funerary rites, she retired to her bed, preparing in the morning to make the pilgrimage in the withered forest of bone trees.

That night she slept unwell.

In her dream she was on a savanna, something she'd seen in books.

Before her was an elephant, this brooding, lumbering creature of tusks and iron skin, and she watched it pass, following the footsteps of others, turning to bone slowly, then into sand.

The elephants' graveyard, another piece of myth.

But that was not what disturbed her as she awoke, struggling to realize there were still hours to go before the dawn.

For she saw footprints in the dust going toward the ruined bones not only of the elephant but the multitude of beasts who came before, realizing what she had seen had happened uncounted times.

But the footprints which she saw trailing into the dust ahead of her, they were her own, going toward the elephants' graveyard to become a thing of myth . . .

This dream she had five times before the coming of the dawn.

She left the village and walked on into nearby hills where the forests clustered forever as if they had always been.

The withered trees were thin-bladed, their branches scalpel-fine, the leaves were themselves as piercing as obsidian and so she had to pick her way carefully lest some fall and cut her face.

The country of Elelogap suddenly felt a strange routine, a

staccato of days and nights before bleeding into this secondary now.

A copy of the man's letter was in her hand.

Khuy had copied it and given it to her.

She walked on wearing leather armour, her body encased in an extra skin leaving her face clear. But her face only.

Sometimes the children tried to climb these shallow hills but a few cuts were enough to convince them to stay close to home.

Reaching a clearing she stopped.

The trees rounded themselves to every side, she vaguely reminded of the parapet of Khuy's home and then she sat amid grass the colour of salt and thought.

There was an obscene gap in her mind now slowly sealed away again. This abyss was realizing how all others saw the man.

Those of the town had heard of the death but of all those here most were too old to worry over the unknown, or care.

As for the children, they settled the uncertainty by saying the dead man was not truly a man at all but merely an illusion, something adults created to playact something which was not.

In their minds the man was nothing more than paper and straw pretending to be a man and the adults pretending also, having nothing else to do.

Kestrel opened a satchel drew forth an apple and bit into it. Then spit it out again.

It had no taste. She was not even hungry. It had been routine, her eating at this time now. She hadn't noticed before. For a moment she held a terror that the death had been contagious, that now she too would join him in oblivion, by her hand.

She gazed at the scarlet apple and then tossed it away, watching it be skewered by the grass.

Overhead she heard a bird sing.

But this was impossible.

The forest was dead quiet for all things in the forest were dead or as brittle as stone-piercing glass.

But yet there was birdsong here. She felt it and heard it and rose then, leather hands bending needle-fine grass into curls like a young girl's hair.

As she rose, she saw them. A few of the bronze-grey birds had been at the funeral, short-winged with eyes of sapphire.

She watched realizing they were moving from tree to tree without being pierced or cut apart. As if they were not alive at all.

She walked away from them and as she did an image pierced her mind.

A woman.

A woman dressed in robes standing in a city square wearing a mask exactly like the face of the birds there.

A birdlike mask, feathered all of gold.

With sapphire eyes.

She turned to the letter realizing he had described this as well. He had described what she was seeing inside her mind.

She turned toward the creatures that seemed like those of birds but were not birds at all. They simply couldn't be.

And for a second imagined each had the same face as her own . . .

She turned and began to run from them, hearing the rustle of wings.

Them following.

At a certain point, she stopped.

With each step the cry of wings against the air grew louder, subtly shifting to the sound of her own daughter's passing cries.

With each step she arrived at the same street where her daughter died and no matter how far into the forest, she fled she always arrived at the same place in her skull.

At a certain point, she stopped.

In the oblivion spiral of the forest, she realized there was no escape. She could not run far enough outside of herself.

So, she turned to see them coming, flickering as shadows from grey scalpel-sharpened branch to ground, to branch again.

Perhaps this is what he saw when he opened the door, perhaps this had haunted him, following him even to what seemed the world's edge.

She closed her eyes and let them pass through her, her daughter's name the last thing on her lips.

And Kestrel Waiverly stood frozen in the forest as if she'd been turned to stone . . .

Chapter 6
I heard before you
said a single word

He boarded a passage that day, going west.

In his suitcase, he had packed a few amenities, foremost a lock of hair.

In the train station, waiting, he noticed a shrill song assaulting the air, something no one else seemed to hear.

He boarded the train then, quickly.

As it winnowed past, as the black steel moved on he caught sight of golden sparks along the air in each tree branch, building from shadows into more.

Twice as he sat down, he imagined her.

Or them.

Twice as he sat down, he imagined the women singing their discordant cacophonies existing in a place he had never seen before.

It was no dream, no place of the unreal.

Yet it was.

Behind his eyes lay the room, and them, and a sickly pale scent of decay and their eyes black like cholera in winter.

Behind his mind, the other thoughts coiled serpentlike and the vial in his suitcase beckoned, beckoned.

Beckoned.

But he waited.

He had not yet arrived.

Outside suddenly he imagined fire. He imagined all the country ablaze but stilled it in his mind.

The fields became an ocean then as if the world began in water.

The Earth seemed ocean. All one's steps if taken would lead toward the water. And yet there were continents. There were

forests, great withered forests of bone trees to the west while the east was composed of a desert made only of glass and salt and sand.

Except he knew the continents had moved, the land strode slowly from one place to another and here once the ground had waited, waited to step foot to where he was.

A sickly golden glow reached out and touched the window then, spurring him to the here and now.

He turned away from the window but as he did a woman crossed the threshold of the aisle passing before his eyes as her golden face imperiously stared down at him the entire time before vanishing without a trace.

Leaving but the echo of her song behind.

Not yet he said.

Not yet.

Then the arrival and the delays and the sound of birdsong.

And noticing her, the woman wearing the summer dress with skin the colour of winter.

It was as if they had prepared all this for him.

He had avoided dying in his home merely to die here.

The scent of her loss clung to the air and where she saw cats he also felt the slow agony of a song crawling the back of his head like a worm about to be plucked out by a thing of feathers and wings.

Then the taste of black bile and the slow release.

And staring at her he imagined she too wore the mask and as he fell, he reached out to his face.

His face had grown cold and hard like summer in amethyst.

And the birdsong had closed and slowed and was gone.

It was here, and it was now.

He let himself perish at last.

Chapter 7
Are you now or
have you ever been?

No voice sang.

She opened her eyes to reveal an ancient country spread in all directions and looked down to see her hands, but they were not hands anymore nor was this the land of the home she knew.

There were fields and plains but the grass was the colour of chalk. She walked to a nearby plant, broad leaves hugging the ground and then moved back as the leaves reached out imperiously and she saw the edge of each; they were all serrated, and at the centre of it was a maw hungry for a feast.

She gazed into it as a shadow swam about her and looking up saw a moth in the sky, a moth large enough to cover a portion of the ground in shadow.

She bent down and cupped some of the dust into her hands feeling it almost liquidlike pour between her fingers.

The grass alone was allowing her place to stand.

In the distance were broad broken fingers of stone and behind her lingered a city but though she was aware of it she could not tell why the appearance of it sent shudders along her body.

And the whispering silent words continued, drawing her to the mountains in the distance. So, on she went.

Time had no meaning here. An hour meant nothing more than a second nor a second any more meaning than a year.

She arrived at the fingers of stone as if by her first step and gazing backward recalled in passing the tall withered grass and slithering footfalls of some unnatural thing, the action of her step happening as if between the ticking of a second's hand.

Just as easily she climbed to the top of the stony spire.

Above her four suns circled the sky.

Ruins were everywhere here, the ruined temples of some arcane raven-wasp god. Gazing down below she saw the entire world now, all the countries arrayed before her.

The twice cursed, twice blessed land was there, the red lands and the black with the river swimming between the sinews of the continent's flesh and the continent itself surrounded by the amniotic seas of a primordial ocean.

The temples were not made by human hands. They whispered this arcane truth so they knew and now she knew too. But since this was not Earth, she knew she did not understand.

Then the city, her footsteps gentle as the wind arriving in a metropolis of white block buildings and the people going to and fro from street to street, and she was now in the midst of it.

And then she saw *the* terrible thing.

A woman was upon the street and another woman there, knife in hand, and with a deft quick cut the first woman's flesh was torn. An arm was removed and the second began to feed upon it, sharing this with her brood.

But more disturbing the arm grew back, slowly budding from a nodule of flesh into the rough outline of a skeleton then the blossoming of fingers, then a fully formed hand. There was no pain upon the sacrifice's features; she was as calm as a lamb.

Moving between the milling crowds of people Kestrel saw serpents crawling, vast and monstrosly proud and powerful with lapis lazuli scales about their eyes. They reared up, each larger than twice the height of any woman, and moving forward caught her in the thought of themselves as if she were now a piece of their mythology, their biology, as incapable of fleeing as a hand would be incapable of cutting itself from its arm.

A serpent's tongue flicked along the bridge of her nose and staring eye to eye with it, with *her*, Kestrel listened to the words long written down in some ancestral memory as if the serpent had

merely waited here for her before she was even born, as if it, *she* knew exactly how and when Kestrel would be born, or be.

Words came and words fled and the serpent-guardians moved on again, golden crawling flesh making poetic mosaics on the ground as if their skins were poetry leaving behind themselves with every step they took.

She wandered watching some be cut to pieces only to have those pieces grow again, watching scarlet-bodied women marching as if to war, parading the streets only to melt and dissolve like panes of ice neath a summer sun, finally coming to a wall littered with masks and bird-faced forms she had known before.

And suddenly the sound of an elephant caught her ear.

It was not real she knew, what she was seeing now. In the language of dreams, she was seeing through human eyes.

Suddenly she took one of the masks and put it on her face, realizing the mask was changing, no longer becoming that of a bird. She felt knives growing from where the beak had been and looked now upon the streets she had visited so easily before.

The scarlet-bodied women were not human at all.

Atop six legs were an almost beetlelike body but the mandibles were those of an ant, serrated and blunt. The eyes shifted from yellow to black to yellow, pulsing strobelike each second. These were the soldiers parading the streets just now.

The women whose flesh was cut appeared as translucent piles of flesh, roiling and rolling from place to place covered in uncounted ice-blue eyes.

Some were insects or seemed spiders, their bodies hanging overhead, black legs winnowing each step with the ground.

And what was more, she heard the city breathing, each wall not stone but the insect bones of living creatures living still.

Black centipedes came, their legs curled beneath them, waiting to strike. These slithering things had been the serpents

from before and one of them crept close to her now and in the reflection of a black eye she saw.

She saw herself.

She saw the mask she wore and screamed soundlessly . . .

She could hear them, all the women-things talking, hear the centipedes soundlessly whispering their words along the wind.

And there was a name attached to them.

The name of Arjada.

They did not build their cities but grew them, each wall further constructed from out their flesh. The grass beyond had been grown and built and changed, the floor of the world constructed from a thought rendered into life, though the thought that too remained.

There were many plants here, whole forests of lungs and hearts which the Arjada used to heal themselves at the point of death or injury when they could not heal themselves.

The name Arjada clung to all of them though all of them were different. Arjada were the soldiers and the walls and the guardians and the food and even other forms she had but glimpses of it, flitting the air or gliding the waters, or even beyond.

In a far place, she saw a world orbiting a black star. A sunless world was there which the Arjada knew of and had sent emissaries to, changed and modified to survive where there was neither light nor water.

For a moment she was upon the city of the Arjada then neath an obsidian star and then she stood upon another world circling a single sun.

She saw children run and play and realized this was Earth, the Earth she came from. But something was wrong.

She saw men, not a few but many, far too many. It didn't

make sense to her.

There were as many men as women, and yes, children were playing, but when they went to their mothers, she realized each was the offspring of only one. This was Earth but it was alien to the Earth she knew.

The streets were broadly vast and metallic insects skittered the ground striding on black wheels.

And the city was called something she had never heard before as if such a city had never truly been, but it was true, it was real, and this was indeed her world.

And in the sky were metallic islands adorned with wings which roared.

In a time without time, she scoured the globe going from country to country, to mountains she had never seen before, to oceans without depth, to lakes and rivers, and in none of this was she reminded of what she knew.

She saw it then.

She saw the war.

The Arjada sent their emissaries to Earth.

They came and mankind perished, taken at the flood, and she watched the cities buried in the sand and the continents shift slowly, ever so slowly, as the Arjada came to claim this world as theirs.

Only to change in the attempt.

One soldier came toward Kestrel, mandibles clicking, visibly aware of her.

And she watched as the mandibles cooled away into jaws, as the limbs dissolved and regained some new but foreign shape, turning into hands and legs and feet, as the bones of the insect became the bones of a woman.

And she was staring at herself.

She was staring at herself realizing what the Arjada had become.

They had become this. They had become her.

And the grief of this, the loss of this reached outward, seeking them to make communion with. But only when the stars were right. Grief made a companion of grief.

And she imagined the place where the man had fallen was that same ruined patch of ground where the last human fell.

She imagined he had been standing on the funeral ground of the entire human race when he took his own life.

Whether it was true or not she couldn't tell.

But she awoke to the scalpel sensation of a cut along her cheek, felt a scarlet dye bleed into fingers of leather, and knew all sound in the forest now was gone.

Then she walked slowly, ever so slowly, back to the village from which she came.

Chapter 8
Each year is a
different country

He listened to the story of a jaguar, a creature of the jungle that had been slowly changed, claws becoming hands, teeth filed away. He was in time given the body of a man but despite all this, the beast remained. And he had slaughtered his creators and vanished into the green canopy, never to be seen again . . .

He listened to the story of a man who found himself slowly transformed into the topaz stony flesh of some spider, its body an obelisk. He dreamed and dreamed of lungs hardening into glass and each day found himself growing scales of jewel along his body until one day the metamorphosis was complete, he awoke to the realization he had never been a man, that he'd always been a spider dreaming he was something else.

The man waiting for the train listened to the people telling stories one to another, suddenly uncertain if what they were saying was in fact what he was hearing.

The weight of a second pressed steadily upon his mind.

The black door was there and each glimpse toward it slowly ground into his heart like shards of glass.

He waited before this second knowing what lay beyond, himself changed beyond all recognition.

He opened the door again.

His rooms were there. The nursery and the children nestled in their chairs, silent. He went over to them, panic rising insectlike in his throat.

Gone.

Small bodies still.

Heads lolling to one side or the other like broken flowers in a gentle wind.

The black room had a fireplace but the fire had gone out.

Then the bedrooms.

He went to find the rest of his family lying in several beds bloated into oblivion. On one hand, he noted each small detail, the shape of his son's head, his daughter's hand curled about the finger of her mother.

Yet at the same time it was all washed out like seeds of acid in the rain, obliterated and impossible to tell.

The rooms had books, tables, and chairs, the bedrooms had mirrors, and he saw himself once before he left. But though the rooms had these things he could not recall these things anymore.

By the time he came, the plague had come and gone.

Burnt out of existence it feasted itself on his family and died in the attempt.

Leaving him to remain.

Leaving him the only shard of his own world left.

He boarded the train . . .

Chapter 9
Before the days
of the end

She returned the way she came and went to Khuy's cottage.

Her face was tended to and she spoke, after having a honey cake, telling the good doctor of what had transpired amid the sea of needles and scalpel-fine trees.

"Was it real?" Khuy asked.

I don't know, she said. But I think it happened to him. Maybe that was why he couldn't go on.

"Can you?" she asked finally, quietly, the pair of them seated at the table as dusk crept in.

I have to. There is still the living left to do.

Far away amid the fields clusters of small birds were seen. They winnowed the air, screaming, searching for signs of decay. Small moments of communion bled between their wings as they added Kestrel's grief to their own.

A small girl came then, perhaps five years old.

She wandered about the fields as the trees loomed on in the distance like primordial titans out of ancient times, vast and silent and all-powerful.

She wandered on about the fields with the cries of birdsong overhead and noticed a hand reach into her own.

She stared at three women standing amid the fields and other children gathered together, and in the distance, there moved things of yellow eyes shifting into black.

The girl asked the woman's name but she didn't know.

The girl realized she had forgotten her own.

And a man crept up from between the fields as well, standing amid them all. He turned to gaze upward at the dark

and the darkness gazed back, silent and all-powerful.

And they were not alone, nor anyone, as slowly and softly the man heard those things of scarlet and serrated teeth in the distance and other things with them, all gathered together in their circle as grief bled into mere forgetting.

Then into nothing at all . . .

Epilogue Home again

After six months Kestrel Waiverly returned to Agaliarept. She returned to the quiet and the peace of arguments and conflict and the sounds of dozens of daughters and a few sons.

And those others they also called mother.

Lucillea Khuy had come with her, and welcomed easily into the family.

And tears were shed for those lost and Kestrel set a picture of something she had seen there in the small places beyond.

"What is it?" her daughter Yrabel asked, gazing over Kestrel's shoulder as she sat beside the table.

"This is an Arjada," Kestrel said. "It is an insect I saw a long time ago."

"Is it scary?" Yrabel asked.

"Only sometimes," Kestrel said, "when you don't know exactly what it is."

So, the children were put to bed and Kestrel, Khuy, and the other mothers all showered together, letting the water wash over them as if all the world were water.

Then they too retired and Kestrel shut out the light, noticing the picture of her daughter on the table, last.

End of Part I.

Part II. Prologue

To create a dystopia is not merely creating an unpleasant state. It is not simply a cursed land nor is it simply a place of fear. A dystopia holds one key feature that makes it heartbreaking.

Its longevity.

In a true dystopia, there is a lack of hope coupled with time, the sensation things have always been this way without repair. A dystopia is not merely a place. It is a state of mind.

In comparison a utopia must not merely be mildly comfortable nor can it simply be the absence of pain or fear.

Fear after all is nothing more than another aspect of human life and the living know their lives but the dead know nothing. To merely remove fear is not to give the proper shape to things. Rather a utopia must please and satisfy all people at all times.

And since no single being can ever be satisfied by having a life another has, any society if viewed from the right angle is always going to be dystopian no matter how utopian it at first seems.

Yet this is not itself a tragedy.

One does not admire a painting for its perfection but for its being. One does not discard a work for its imperfections but for its failings. A work of art by definition is not how the world is but how one sees it, and since no two will ever see the same world that both are living in, art will always conform not to expectation but to perception. And one's senses can never be perfect.

However, if it is not perfect, so reasons the utopian, it is not. For this reason, utopia can only provide one solution to those seeking it. The creation of a dystopia. As such a utopia holds one key feature that makes it heartbreaking.

Its longevity.

Chapter 1

A god in a small hourglass

Yrabel and Khuy boarded the train some hours ago, the thin threads, the spider's web, going south. In the distance, the capital became vague shadows, indistinct ziggurats, but this was only because Khuy imagined they were something else.

Ten years had passed since Yrabel's mother returned.

She gazed out the window, her face greeting her eyes.

Her mother had been in a small corner of an unknown country and then came back subtly changed, bringing Aunt Khuy with her. Mother Khuy by now.

At nights Kestrel sang old stories, pieces of places she drew. Her paintings of strange creatures and cities of white coalescent stone now adorned several galleries in the capital.

Khuy sat across from Yrabel now, reading.

Small streaks of white were embedded in her hair but Khuy was still small, and demure, her olive skin contrasting with Yrabel's winter-pale appearance. Yet both women like all women had the same ice-blue, faded eyes.

Kestrel had written, slowly unfolding a story out of time. In it all mankind were but shadowed echoes of something else, something older and darker and from another world.

It was marvellous fiction.

Many asked where her ideas came from and Kestrel truly smiled, as she often did, and said she didn't know.

Perhaps she didn't.

By now Kestrel was a well-known novelist. Her tome scattered the city, read by all.

And of course, by being fiction, like the paintings, they were believed, the same as one believes in a dream when they are having it.

Kestrel Waiverly herself never argued either way. Only by

perceiving the words as fiction, they were given weight enough to impact others' lives. If she said the Arjada and the far worlds were true none would have believed her or perhaps would have imagined her insane, and her family too, and though madness was not deemed a terrible thing it was deemed in poor taste. So she never argued the words she wrote were true in any way.

And all the time her daughters slowly grew, each taking on a chosen field first made in childhood, now extended into the remaining portions of their lives.

Ithreil was a painter like her mother carving into canvas portions of the mist-shrouded ground she saw across the waters of the river.

Zeiyrsai a banker at the capital's heart, slowly, softly sending out small threads of the city's blood.

And Inneschar . . . well she had gone on walkabout five years before heading south to the Antarctic shore. By now none were certain if she were alive.

And Yrabel? Yrabel and Khuy were on vacation now.

Khuy, book in hand, continued to read. Yrabel glanced at the tome, but the spine was black, unreadable.

Outside the fields clicked past, green shadows of eyes peering into Yrabel's own. She was listening to the savage rhythm of their bodies, the slow click of the miles coalescing into the thoughts of flesh as if each field were a human form suspended not in space but in time.

Imagining this, taking this as the first logical step she considered the fields unfolded from their true selves, herself witnessing them spread beyond what they truly were. Yet with just the right frame of mind, they would compact together again and she would see not green fields but rows of bodies clicking by, mile on mile, all saluting her as she came.

Taking pen and paper from her jacket pocket she wrote until she heard Khuy stop reading, or rather felt Khuy's eyes stop

scanning the page, and glance up. Khuy was now looking at her.

"New idea?" Khuy asked.

Yrabel nodded and continued writing, not even noticing the flavour of the pen in her hand.

After the idea was done, she asked Khuy what book it was and Khuy read a passage at random.

"In the desert nameless is the city. In the city nameless a library. In the library nameless books without words which are individual souls collected together, each an entry, a paragraph, a sentence.

"And who shall read these words, these lives?"

"Only those alien things who bled from off the books into being, imagining they are only what they have left behind . . ."

Yrabel mentioned that sounded like something she had written in her youth. Khuy handed the book to her and Yrabel looked at the author's name.

It was her own.

"Just rereading it," Khuy said.

Yrabel nodded and turned to look at the men saluting her as they passed, mile on mile . . .

The train cooled past the fields till the fields were desert and the wind took on the scent of water.

Their vacation was to be spent south in Ixenlira and Irenlira. The cities straddled each side of The River, their southernmost edge bordering the Outer Sea of Karkormak.

It had been decided Yrabel needed a time away from her family. Not out of grief or suffering. But out of understanding.

Back in Agaliarept she had exhausted the city of its wealth and bearing. Where Kestrel had turned her grief into art Yrabel turned her thoughts into subtle signs of madness, not madness as disease merely madness as expression.

A street was not a street in her new mythology.

If one read how Yrabel described a street it would be possessed of six dimensions only one of which she described with any depth.

Her characters were not alien as her mother defined the term. They were not insects given human flesh but humans given insect bodies, or bodies less possible to explain.

Some stories would feature those of Agaliarept, readily definable people thrown into her fiction. In some stories one would move faster and faster the older they went until by the story's end the characters were blurs of light and all this she would describe in the most minute detail.

Or in other stories, one would grow heavier and heavier, their bodies not appearing larger but rather more compact until at the proper time they would walk out into the wasteland and become a thing of black, striding into a garden of forms now identical to their own, drawing light beneath their very skin.

In other stories all people would wear the same garments, the same masks, (when she mentioned the idea of all people wearing masks like those of birds with sapphire eyes her mother forbade it outright. So, the people of her fiction wore masks with the faces of insects or spiders instead,) all acting the same without deviation, where even a single misstep would lead to tragedy.

The problem was, as Kesyre, Janic, and Ib'Radim Ithrael explained, Yrabel's stories were deemed an insult to the public good, not because they were strange of course but because they always used existing people in them.

This meant that a man would read of how his life was supposedly seen by her, growing heavily with each passing year until he would become a thing of black, a star reversed standing in the middle of a wasteland, his very dreams out of reach for though his heart and soul were gone his mind remained.

Those who raced, growing faster and faster would imagine

this an insult, that somehow pursuing through their lives some goal, sacrificing all to achieve it diminished them somehow, in Yrabel's eyes at least, and if diminished in the eyes of one potentially it could be diminished in the eyes of all.

Not to mention the story she did on Kesyre herself . . .

It was decreed by the city council of the capital that Yrabel would be exiled, (no, "exile" is too harsh and unkind a word. She would be on "vacation,") until her stories were not deemed an insult. Or better still she would be allowed to go to another place and do to them as she had done to the people of Agaliarept. (After all the people of Agaliarept wished to share the skills of their artists with those they didn't always like.)

In this way, it was hoped Yrabel would atone.

But as Yrabel herself pointed out beforehand during sentencing her stories were her creation and given to only a few of her friends, none of whom passed them on in any great amount. As for those she wrote about how could one imagine racing into light or becoming a star in reverse or wearing masks of cockroaches in countries of giants meant anything at all? This was merely how she saw things.

There was neither malice nor intent behind it just as one does not intend to see a sunset. One merely does.

Such an argument fell on deaf ears and so Yrabel went forth with Khuy beside her, wishing Kestrel and her sisters a sad farewell but somehow knowing she would return.

And so they went, going to the cities of salt-black wine.

The train curled onward, leading to the shore. Mountains lived along the edge between the Outer Sea and Inner Desert and at the mouth of the mountains by The River was Ixenlira and Irenlira.

They were unlike Agaliarept in every way.

Rather than very squat bare buildings only two storeys

high Ixenlira and Irenlira were jagged spires of black obsidian with shards of gold embedded in them making an illusion on the mountains, giving them another colour, wasplike.

The train edged toward the cities' boundaries, stopped and cooled and they departed not upon a train station but a point before habitation, stepping foot upon sand suddenly shimmering into white and gold. And black.

Both women were the only occupants, outside the staff.

The train was designed to move backwards as easily as forward. There was no "head" nor "tail" but rather two engines on each side of the sloping serpentine as it slowly pulled away, gathering steam.

Suddenly their black carriage, centipedelike, became an image in the distance, a mirage in dreams.

Before them was a young woman dressed in motley multicoloured robes, her face utterly obscured by a veil. Even her eyes were impossible to see.

"Hello," she said simply. "You are expected."

"I imagine so," Khuy said, Yrabel's book in hand.

"My name is Caelisira Tarheign. Come." She raised her hands and turned toward Ixenlira. "You are welcome here. All are welcome here. Come into the cities of refuge."

And so they came to the place of their exile at last.

Chapter 2

Exiled in the real

Ixenlira was utterly unlike Agaliarept.

It was not simply the external but the internal as well.

Khuy had never seen such chaos magnified before. The streets were not the gridlike pattern of home nor even the slow-sloping quiet of Ythriel's villages, (villages which they were likewise exiled from. No. On "vacation" from,) but rather clusters of people, all a cacophony together, all of the different forms and different eyes, some with eyes of gold or eyes of silver. The young woman herself had eyes of the deepest amber, a golden colour bleeding into crimson.

All wore garments but the garments differed wildly. In Agaliarept one's choice of clothing was limited to a suit, a dress, or for children a simple white nightgown used at all times.

Here though . . . Yrabel passed several naked children and naked men while others wore the same mottled garments Caelisira did, smears of red and blue and gold interspersed together.

But others wore summer dresses, three young girls wore leather and others had something embedded in their skins.

"Tattoos," their guide explained when Khuy asked about a woman with half her left face covered in blue and spiralling patterns of black, "these are tattoos written in the skin."

They were led to a singular tower and discovered it did not have two storeys but fifty.

Caelisira led them to a small room just as they entered into the darkness waiting there. The room was impossibly small and bare and Khuy asked what they were doing there when it began to move. They were rising upward Khuy realized, growing slightly panicked to be away from the ground.

The room stopped, they got out and their guide led them

to a new door, and opening this they saw a land below.

"Your home as long as you need it."

The room was brightly lit, a vast window across from them letting all light in. There were couches and three chairs, a table in the corner, and a bed. All was light and white and their guide showed them the balcony and their world below.

Or tried to. Khuy stayed inside.

"How much do we owe?" Khuy asked.

"What do you mean?" Caelisira's voice took on a quizzical tone.

"How much money is all this?" the woman asked.

"You're in Ixenlira," Caelisira said, then removed her veil, revealing a pale form, not winter-pale like Yrabel but pale like sea foam in a summer sea. "There is no money here. One is not paid anything."

"How do we live then?"

"However way you want to," their guide said then walked out the door, disrobing as she went.

"I think I'm going to like it here," Yrabel said.

Their apartments were located near the city's heart.

In arriving Khuy wrote a letter, sending this back to Agaliarept and Kestrel. By now Khuy was missing her of course.

Yrabel began her time in exile by walkabout. She left her apartment, moving among the streets, passing harmlessly the naked and the clothed and those screaming and those singing and those with nothing else to do but bask in quiet narcotic repose.

In her mind's eye, she was making sense of this her way.

Iahligel she wrote one day, sitting on a smoothed stone unwashed of centuries.

"What is that?" a young girl asked, pointing to the book, and she explained.

"It is a book about *Iahligel*."

"What is that?" the young girl asked.

"Living continents. Imagine all this were alive, each road and street and the desert and the sands and even the wind, all alive and living now. All thinking, all being and ourselves nothing but fragments, pieces of thoughts they have so that you are nothing but the wind's idea of what a girl must look like and I nothing but this stone right here," tapping the stone, "nothing but this stone's imagining of what a woman must be. So that even if we meet here and now you might only be what the wind imagines I would want you to be and want to see."

"I see," the young girl said, then left.

Then Yrabel noticed that the stone she was sitting on was breathing . . .

She closed her eyes, listening to the wind.

And the wind started speaking to her . . .

Or so she thought.

Madness has its language, like everything.

Even the word madness only defines itself. One cannot step outside the word to know its meaning before meaning anything. All words are creatures born past tense.

Yrabel sat adrift in her senses slowly walking away from Ixenlira's outermost walls.

In her mind's eye, she was watching the world reverse. She could feel when this desert was a lake, when the grass had no master so long ago no eyes set upon it. Yet time remained.

Time had no language after all as one would describe it. Time exists apart the description of itself.

Time bled into mountains and desert and grass and gazing at her hands even this, even this was composed of time.

And all the labyrinthine paths backward and forward she tried imagine and went listening to the wind awhile.

But the wind still sounded like Tzaelria's voice even now.

And still sometimes, just sometimes she'd peer into the sands and Tzaelria's face would greet her, the small face of a child suddenly old, the same age as herself.

It was as if sand were given body now, given her sister's form.

But Tzaelria had only been a little girl when horse's hooves tattooed themselves along her face and Yrabel could not remember her after this or during this, but only before.

Her last memory was of Tzaelria alive, opening the door.

Never closing it again.

And Yrabel imagined even as a child some unknown logic's alchemy to all of it, seeing not her sister as a sister but a serpent become a bright centipede on glistening black legs slithering away, Yrabel trying to run after, unable to do so. She hadn't learned yet to walk. She was still confined to her chair.

And the door closed on all this memory and the bright sun flew softly its wings against her face.

She was in the desert again and in the distance the city.

Glancing at her notebook she noticed it filled with words.

Then she returned. Going the way she came.

"... as such it did not know what these portions of parchment were save that they could not be eaten and should not be harmed.

"It was as if the books whispered to it how to speak and what to say, creating speech in reverse. Time had not invented the language it was reading now. The words were the product of a dead race whose thoughts bled into the mind of Time over millennia.

"It was in lockstep with creatures who now existed as nothing more than symbols which it had devoured within the body and the form of itself.

"And so, Time wept for in its existence it noted sorrow. And if Time was not, where would come sorrow or grief, or love?

"So, Time wept. Yet Time still was ..."

Her words concluded themselves.

She was standing before a few people reciting her latest story. Since those in Ixenlira and Irenlira did not need money or poverty of any kind one's entire life was spent merely in finding something to do.

And Yrabel's "something to do" was reading before an audience and having them answer back.

It was not enough merely for her to speak but for them to counter. A girl in leather wearing a collar about her throat was making her points to the tale, twisting it, winnowing it away from Yrabel's logic into the logic of her own.

Her story would become a multitude in time. Each story would become a multitude, (each page the fluttering of an infinite bird's wing,) without number or recall.

In the opened closed-off section of a street as the sun sent shadows in the corners beyond Yrabel finished, barely considering her exile anymore.

It had been forty days since their arrival in the city of refuge.

Her recital over the others dispersed, some with leash in hand leading to collars and slender throats, others moving to take her place to tell stories of their own.

But one was waiting for her.

Wearing a mask.

The mask looked familiar, golden feathers rounded about a hidden face and sapphire blue eyes, not ice-pale like her own but radiantly blue like an ocean just come to being before a blackened storm.

How did you like the story, Yrabel asked.

"It was very interesting," the woman said.

Beautiful mask.

"Thank you."

Is there something you need?

"The chance to talk with you," she said.

The slender woman's hands were icy pale Yrabel noted and she was led along the dim-lit corridors and streets with the shadows of buildings overhanging them.

She imagined herself in the logic of an alchemy, imagining the woman a shadow and asking her why she took this form, wearing the body of a woman now.

And in the waking alchemical dream, the shadow answered.

"I am whatever the sun makes of me . . . when I am beside the buildings I become the buildings, when I am beside the gardens, I become the gardens . . . I am dependent upon the real as the real is dependent upon some other thing. And when it flees, I shall go with it where there is neither night nor day . . ."

"Did you say something?" the woman asked.

No, Yrabel simply said. She was merely deep in thought.

At a café she sat and ordered something to drink, the woman giving her name as Sirenghsia.

It is a beautiful name, Yrabel said.

"Thank you. I admired your story."

It was for reasons such as this that I was exiled.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

What can I do for you?

"I need help with a song. Of late I haven't been able to find the muse I need. I think she is you."

Yrabel moved forward toward the mask, imagining the rounded white table as a spider on sinuous legs. The café was dim-lit and in the background, people could be seen tattooed of storms and stone and glass.

I'll help, Yrabel said. I'd be happy to do anything. For you.
And so, the pair began.

Chapter 3
Gates of the dawn
and the rain

Khuy seldom saw her adopted daughter.

Yrabel would often awaken at dawn and leave, crossing down lengthwise the canopy of towers to the ground, the sound of a door closing the only sign she even was.

Khuy during these days tended to the sick and wounded, the slow multitude of the many whose hazards made up the city of Irenlira and Ixenlira.

It was the long recall of bodies that made her long for home.

She would come across a man who had fallen from a great height, and carefully set his bones, realizing the thin membrane between the living and the dead was this, her hands only, hands which had touched Kestrel but only a season before.

Her room, (the term "office" was irrelevant in this city,) was littered with various people, some naked or dressed, some wounded or broken and she would tend them one by one, sending them back into the towers and the shadow-sloping valleys of the streets, each thanking her.

And sometimes she imagined Kestrel's face was there imprinted upon a woman looking somehow so much like her. There were such hard moments as these to endure or recall as anything but the animal grief.

And at each daybreak the clicking of a door shutting away, her struggling to awake, realizing the sad grim logic of imagining this day were every day . . .

"How do you work?" Yrabel asked.

That had been her first question.

"I simply draw things together, pieces of memory."

They had gone for a walk beyond the walls that first day and asked each other how they honed their new mythologies.

For Yrabel the attempt was in the intent. By this she meant she intended to write only what she saw and felt and so whatever she created was correct.

For Sirenghsia it was different though.

She would scour books for places out of reach where minds seldom went. She mentioned idly Czernobog and Qu Yuan and a place known only as Tao Yuanming, a peach spring blossom valley blistering off into perfection. (Yrabel never heard of such places of course.)

But after she found such books, they'd often flit away as an autumn wing. If she went to where the memory was the object was now gone leaving only her recollection to give proof it even was.

"How can I be your muse then?" Yrabel asked.

The singer explained that she wished to read the young woman's life. Yrabel would speak of her existence and from this, Sirenghsia would sing of it.

And their two styles would collide.

She began simply by mentioning her mothers. All of them. Kestrel and Khuy but also Charna and Bascaiel and Jyrou.

Kestrel looked like winter in her dreams while Charna was this blunt pillar of salt moving across the canopy of a street collecting her as she had been, walking with her as a child.

Jyrou and Bascaiel, hair like fire, both of them, always together, the pair of them so close it seemed one couldn't tell if Bascaiel was Jyrou or Jyrou was Bascaiel.

All this she told the stranger walking by.

And her family, her siblings?

She had close to thirty all told. An afternoon became their country, an hour in the shadow of the tower of her new home

took up residence of a street and a week in Agaliarept. They had names and she listed them, trying to condense a life into that one week when Khuy became Mother Khuy.

But only Inneschar lingered in her mind.

"What happened to her?" the masked woman asked.

"She went south. No one knows what happened after that."

Then came the portion of the day devoted to Tzaelria.

It was hard to distill an unlived life to an afternoon.

With the others, Yrabel knew the path ahead so it was easy to say who had gone in what direction and why.

Except herself of course. One never knows exactly the direction their own feet will tread.

But with Tzaelria it was different since she was so small there were an infinite number of possibilities she could have been.

The stranger listened, tilting her head the way certain sparrows do, gazing at a worm.

Finally, the first day ended and the first night began.

After this Yrabel's life became Sirenghsia's country.

It was not enough to mention names but lives, nor enough to mention lives but details, nor enough to mention details but *exact* details.

An entire day became a still frame of her father standing before a mantelpiece, listening to her recite her first story.

A season became fifty trillion words, each word describing one small aspect of a single moment of a life.

All this she told without even knowing why.

But since this was Yrabel the way she told it differed ever so slightly.

Children could be perceived as statues expanding like pools of mercury in the sun.

Her father was an elephant thundering to the sound of the drums of his heartbeat and Khuy was a piece of foliage, a

malachite forest cooled to a woman's shape.

And her mother Kestrel was winter of course.

All this Sirenghsia listened to as day passed to day.

Finally, the stranger asked why she was here and not within the boundaries of her home.

And to this also Yrabel explained.

Chapter 4

A scattering of sins

She had mentioned before of course that her stories had been the cause of her leaving. But the exact mechanism, the lever of transforming word to deed had only happened when Kesyre decided she had been insulted.

And this was the day . . .

There was a story.

It permeated hand to hand, eye to eye, and in the story, Yrabel took certain aspects of her mother's novel and altered them.

Slightly.

Her mother had written of the Arjada.

She had written, (using metaphor of course,) of the grief of loss reflected in an insect's savage eye.

The council was composed of the wisest women of the age, (or at least of Agaliarept, or so they said,) and so Yrabel, in reading her mother's words again simply asked herself the question of what Kesyre would have done.

And because it was an unconscious automatic thought she merely wrote, having as little concern for the cause as one would have for explaining why a certain sky was red.

And this is what she imagined what would have happened to her, and them, to Janic and Ithrael who also went into the void with her.

She would have come upon the sea of stems and wine dust waiting to reckon into the texture of water, with the spires of stone behind them and the city far ahead.

But having not suffered the grief of loss they would have felt a different reckoning.

Instead, they would have realized their lives a lie.

Imagine it, one step to be a woman, another to be a fly, a scorpion, a black centipede roiling the countryside.

Kesyre was known for her stoic demeanor. She regarded herself and Ythriel as the pinnacle of all existence. Their city was *the* city, all others merely shadows of the one true reality. Her people were *the* people, all others were merely unfinished in becoming what they were meant to be. Citizens of the nation of Ythriel. Her faith in *her* humanity was her savage saving grace, she said.

Well then, what would happen if one discovered they were not human?

In the story, being left upon the sea of stems Kesyre discovered she could see as insects did. Her colleagues' faces were smeared of colour and Kesyre could now see all spectrums of light.

With just a flick of her senses, anger became a lake of blue written as a tattoo about Janic's eye.

With just a flick of movement, Ithrael became a motley sea of hues, her hands composed of reds and whites and blacks, pistoning back and forth like the eyes of certain predatory things.

The grass took on an infinite shade and her feet then led her into the city of the insect-kind.

They walked a time, time having no meaning here, and so arrived seemingly before they came.

They watched the Arjada, their faces all a cacophony of colours, lighting up and blackening then lightening again. The strobe-pulsing of the Arjada eye was not intimation but controlled speech and Kesyre could now read the alien mind.

And the Arjada spoke so eloquently of the beauty of its kind, the pinnacle of creation descending into itself, Kesyre finally confronted with her own words thrown back to her and in the story at least, if not in truth, these final words. *Kesyre was going mad.*

That had been enough for Yrabel to be exiled. No, to go on “vacation.” And never come back.

This was the final line after Janic and Ithrael were both pulled into Kesyre’s body as she screamed her defiance in the city of the Arjada race.

She had become a black hole, drawing all life into the black decay of herself.

For whatever reason Kesyre took offense.

That had been the cause of Yrabel’s exile from the city of Agaliarept.

As they talked the writer asked the singer about her own life too.

Sirenghsia said little on the subject though and in the gaps she left Yrabel tried to fill the best she could.

She imagined Sirenghsia was a wanderer from a far country, perhaps immortal and undying, the mask her talisman to keep her grounded to the ground.

Or maybe she was a thief. Such things happened here infrequently.

Or maybe there was nothing behind the mask at all, no face, no life, no anything.

Twice now she asked for the mask to be removed but Sirenghsia never did.

And they kept making their almost solitary rounds.

As for the songs themselves?

Often Yrabel sat as Sirenghsia drew up her crowds, standing in cul-de-sacs as naked women or men veiled in robes would come, (or women wearing leashes,) and she would sing, these some of the words she was drawing on.

*“From the gates of the dawn and the night none
may walk, no ground be known, no place to step*

one's feet upon, no place to own."

And afterward, the crowds would disperse, shadows
melting into night and Yrabel would then return to her new home.
Always wondering what lay beneath the mask . . .

Chapter 5

All ready except the east wind

"When all the cities are dead, we will imagine the towns have uprisen into them, and when all the towns are destroyed even a lone shed will seem vast as the cities which once had been."

Kesyre stood looking at the graffiti and was not impressed.

The lyrics were on the wall of the Ministry of Justice. An ocean of stone had now become home to a blue archipelago of discontent. She shook herself then, knowing what she just thought was incredibly foolish. (It was something someone might think of as madness.)

Janic crept up beside her and spoke.

"Another one?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure Yrabel is away from us?"

"She has been sent away, yes."

"Yet the stories continue."

"I noticed that."

Kesyre turned to look at the small woman standing to her left, her owl-ridged glasses making her seem . . . unhuman somehow.

"We can find the ones responsible," Janic said.

"And then?"

After the malcontent's insult to the state, (Yrabel was now to be considered a "malcontent" since this sounded a better reason to remove someone than 'artist,') it had been hoped the stories and her words would simply melt away as winter. One didn't burn her books or censure them since to do so would be destructive.

Rather they were meant merely to be ignored for if Kesyre

said they must be ignored surely the state which she was would agree with her.

Yet new branches had emerged from the tree of the malcontent . . . oh stop that! Angrily Kesyre strode away from the grey wall to the doors set high at the top of the massive stairs leading to one of the highest openings in all Agaliarept.

She crossed all ten stairs and then looked down realizing this was the highest point one could see overlooking the great square.

Feeling her importance she made a simple request.

"Bring me Kestrel Waiverly. We must talk with her," she said.

Kestrel Waiverly sat in a small office sitting before Kesyre.

Kesyre wore a dress grey as the stone ocean of the building they were in, a subtle reminder she was not merely flesh but more.

"Please, anything you wish to drink? To eat?"

"Why am I here?" the officer asked.

"You've seen your daughter's stories permeate my city."

"*The city*," Kestrel corrected her, which Kesyre ignored the best she could.

"Yes, well, I simply need to know who is writing these new stories. Is it you, your family?"

"No," Kestrel said simply. "Because if it was, we'd sign our names to it."

"I see."

The veiled point of intimidation Kesyre felt. Even as their daughter was not with them, she was still by their side. Or rather, they were still by hers.

"You do realize how troubling this is. We can't have such insults continue indefinitely."

"And how are you being insulted, *personally*, by all this?"

"It is an affront to our city, to our values. It was hoped by having your daughter go on vacation . . ."

"Be exiled," Kestrel corrected her.

"*Be on vacation*, that the peace of our city would continue. Now however the words remain, they are growing outward like a flood. Surely this damages your daughter's reputation. Help me find those responsible and perhaps I can even rescind her vacation."

Kestrel rose and then simply walked away, going to the door.

"Stop!" Kesyre said. Kestrel ignored her and closed the door behind her. Kesyre following.

Kestrel walked to the great square.

Janic and Ithrael noticed this and followed and with those two followed an echo of the bureaucracy of Agaliarept. They poured from rooms like anemones wafting in sea-breezes watching as their leader followed one who was supposed to follow her.

Outside Kestrel walked down the steps and Kesyre again cried out for her to stop. Kestrel did.

In the square were the others. Charna and Bascaiel and Jyrou.

Their daughters and sons had already left for other cities and towns, to Ai and Oribas and Elelogap. Only these four were left. And they would be going soon.

"Help me!" Kesyre ordered.

"And what would you have us do?" Charna asked.

"These words, these ideas continue. We do not know where they come from. Officers search the city but cannot find their authors. Last night the Ministry of Justice was vandalized. We had guards stationed here and yet the malcontent got through."

"Perhaps the guards did it," Jyrou and Bascaiel said.

This had not occurred to Kesyre before.

Ithrael then stepped forward to protect her leader.

"And why would the guards do this?" she asked.

"Why not ask them?" Kestrel said.

"If we asked our guards why they vandalized a wall they would deny it for they would never do such things."

"Or perhaps they would simply lie and merely say they wouldn't do such things."

Kestrel climbed up a step and then another until she was staring Kesyre eye to eye.

"Tell me," Kestrel asked, "when you told my daughter to leave and when Lucillea went with her did you truly believe that would be enough?"

"Your daughter is not well," Kesyre said.

"My daughter is not here, yet she remains. *You* are not well," Kestrel said and then stepped down the stairs. "My daughter has her turn of phrase. I admit that. Her way of seeing things. She never insulted you or anyone here. She just spoke truly, correctly, and in her way of saying it. You were insulted by her language but her language is not simply her."

Kestrel turned then to look at Janic and Ithrael and Kesyre.

"Everyone who read what she wrote was influenced by her. Guards and officers and councillors. You asked who wrote the words. Maybe you did. Maybe you wrote it yourself and just can't remember anymore."

The four women then turned to go.

A man was sitting on a bench nearby and then rose. He walked up the stairs, the four waiting for him at the square's edge and he went down and whispered something in Kesyre's ear.

Then he walked on with them, arm in arm with Kestrel and Bascaiel.

"What did he say?" Ithrael asked.

"He said you wrote the words," Kesyre said, staring

fixedly at her sister.

Kesyre was going mad.

Kestrel had had to wait for the proper moment before they'd leave. If all had gone into exile at once it would have been impossible but instead, a few went at a time, some going north or south, a few to the isles of Ithrym, and a few others to the desert and the city of Temsla.

And all the time their daughter staying here.

Or rather the memory of her.

The stories of course were little more than fragments, pieces of paper whose meaning was attached not merely to their being but to how they were perceived. Yrabel was deemed dangerous only because someone read in her words some danger but absent this her words most likely would have been ignored.

The people crying the loudest against her only saw something ugly in themselves.

Now knowing their daughter would always occupy the city of Agaliarept it was time for the last of them to leave.

The five boarded the train, taking their possessions with them.

Heading south.

Epilogue
Myself, holding a box,
holding myself

It was the night of the Tzetzelmwrm when the song was to be sung. The Tzetzelmwrm was an ancient ceremony out of myth. On the eve of the season, various individuals would be dressed as objects of fear. One would find women dressed as fire or rats or the mottled bodies of frozen insects. Children would grow a second skin into the flesh of ghouls or of the dead.

Not everyone wore this of course, but enough did.

And on the eve of the season with many dressed as their graven fears, Sirenghsia began her last song at last . . .

The train had arrived a day before.

Kestrel had lit from the black body which for a second seemed an older thing, the other four with her, and there in the desert stood Khuy. They embraced and then Kestrel noticed Yrabel was nowhere to be seen. It was then that Khuy explained Sirenghsia and the song.

After this they walked amid the crowds, the veiled bodies and the unclothed, leashes astride slender throats and the walking wounded walking now beside Khuy.

She had gained a reputation as the mender of the flesh.

Now standing here was her entire clan.

Strangers passing them nodded to Khuy and she bowed to them in turn, then at last a singular question caught her attention.

"How are our children?" Khuy asked

"They are well. They are scattered."

"Was there difficulty leaving?"

"No, no it was an easy affair." Kestrel slipped her hand into Khuy's own. "I missed you so now it's an easier affair."

Then the ascent to the tower, then several women and one

man showering together for a time.

After this a bed, some sleep, some time upon their beds again. All leading to the following day.

To the ceremony of the Tzetzelmwrm.

Yrabel was in her cul-de-sac when she saw her father standing there. She went to him and they shook hands.

"I missed you," she said, imagining him with tusks drooping from his jaw, suit a skin of grey, eyes black as gardens of bodies condensing into themselves.

"I missed you," he said, seeing this young woman wearing a motley robe of gold and grey, her auburn hair tanned a lighter hue somehow, her ice-pale eyes melting into grey.

Afterward, she showed him where the people would sit and explained the song and the singer.

She never asked about Agaliarept, Kesyre, or anyone.

It had not occurred to her that it mattered either way, Kesyre now a memory after all, and a memory can be forgotten or recalled but never exactly changed. Whatever Kesyre was she would remain still.

So, all was in readiness for the night.

The five were gathered together with Yrabel.

Sirenghsia was before them and surrounding her mothers and her father were women dressed in fears of fire and storm and glass and pain. (How do clothe yourself in pain, how does pain look before your eyes?)

Sirenghsia still wore the birdlike mask and sang.

Earlier in the day Khuy had been asked about her by Kestrel but nothing could be learned. The singer never took off the mask, that oddly familiar shape glimpsed as dreams in dreams.

The song was about Tzaelria, their daughter.

In the song she imagined the girl had not died but lived

and grew ever so slowly a day at a time until one day at the season's end she journeyed south, going the way all others went.

And she left her name behind her, her face behind, found another in a hidden place where the maps don't show, began her new life then sheltered and shielded behind layers of other voices and names and things, other senses and other eyes.

And there came her sister, (her sister imagining the woman her sister here,) and together they made communion of the years until the woman knew how well all things had turned out for all, to see her family standing there . . .

The song ended as memories often do, not in a rush but the slow breaking down of blinds.

Fire and rats and plague and the sound of a horse's hooves heard and Kestrel, Khuy and the others stood softly seeing their daughter's life live out, becoming Sirenghsia as the singer came before them and Yrabel embraced the singer then, hugging her neck, heads bent down together, then Yrabel rose her head again and went walking among a crowd of distorted things.

"It was a pleasure to meet you all," she said.

"Yes . . . a pleasure," Khuy countered.

"Could we . . . could I see your face?" Kestrel asked.

"What purpose would there be in that?"

She went among the crowds then as the five walked away until they came beyond the city walls and passed them, all staring north, imagining Yrabel there, her words scattered even in the tortured sleep of Kesyre now. Tzaelria was there also, the memory of her body left behind, confined to a single blasted spot of a grey and broken street.

As for the rest of her?

Not one of them could say.

End of Part II.

Part III.
Prologue

A fisherman was upon the ocean.
He sailed and sailed until he came to an island.
Upon the island was he made king and given all he
desired in palaces and gardens.
But he was told after a year the island would sink.
And after a year the island sunk and he escaped, returning
to the country of his home.
Well, another fisherman heard the tale and he too sailed
upon the ocean.
He too sailed until he came to the island.
And there was he made king.
But he sent ships out to scour for other islands.
And when the right island was found he began.
He moved the buildings. He moved the animals.
He moved the people.
And when the island sank the fisherman was made king
for many years in peace and security and peace of mind upon his
newfound isle . . .

Chapter 1

Cold war in a cold garden

The wind was a savage thing. One did not hear it anymore, nor even feel it. It permeated one's thoughts the way a cancer would until there was no separation between yourself and the howl of the air, as if the thin membrane of a life dissolved away leaving only the echo of a cry. Or of a scream.

The woman wore her armour well. Crossing snow-bled tundra seeded black of storms the grey form moved across each wasteland imperiously proud.

The woman wore her armour well.

Behind her was a secondary sound nestled in the wind's crying shame. The sound of the machines.

She strode on, feeling a small tear at the back of her left leg. Blood was still seeping from the wound but she pressed on even as the cold bled into her.

The woman wore her armour well.

Without knowing it she stopped.

Ahead of her were the crags of the World's Edge. Beyond this the Outer Sea and beyond this Thascalios.

But the crags loomed ahead and night was falling and the machines were coming and quite without realizing it she stopped.

She had kneeled in the snow even while imagining her body was moving, even while imagining she had reached the walls of the World's Edge. But it wasn't so.

She turned to see bodies black and metallic slowly coming up the ancient road and just as she imagined herself reaching the first rung of stone she was caught, her body still kneeling in the snow.

Below her was a road made uncounted centuries ago.

They would know of it, of course, these machines.

They built it.

Then they crept silently back toward the city.
Taking her with them. Again.

There was a dome in the distance, ice-blue like the woman's eyes. Reaching its outer skin they found the airlock, plucking her inside. Then the removal of the vaguely insectlike outer form, revealing a slender woman within.

The machines had taken human form this time, looking exactly like those she had known, distorted slightly, taken from her memories and thoughts, meant in a corrupted way to ease her back into this life she was forced to live.

The second circular airlock peeled away and she was taken back into corridors bleeding off forever, revealing Tzaltuo who welcomed her back inside.

This had been her fifth attempt at escape.

By now it was hoped she would yield.

But as she was led away Tzaltuo noted the young woman smiling, knowing she never would. More than this.

She *could* never yield.

Back to her old rooms again, to the blue and white chambers and her bed and half a wall composed of the view outside. She could see the storm she had walked through hours earlier. It had not seemed to change at all.

Neither had she.

Her leg by now was mended.

In the airlock, her "mother" had flesh-tailored the injury away. There wasn't even a scar.

She gazed at the storm realizing she had been there and therefore logically could be there again. But the Edge beckoned beyond this and she had no remedy for it.

One thing at a time though.

She would have to make it to the Edge.

Chapter 2
Neath a starless
shade of sky

The city had no name. It was simply called the Last City. Since the people here did not know her language nor did she know theirs initially the “Last City” was spoken of as Agalira, thereby giving it a name, (only if one did not know the language spoken,) even if it seemingly had no name at all.

The Last City was the last outpost of a vanished human race, one that had existed hidden amid the snows seemingly forever.

Until Inneschar discovered it.

She had journeyed far into the ocean of Karkormak and spotted the World’s Edge and the other side of it. The ship had a crew of nearly forty and they had been on a simple fishing run.

The storm-touched seas had once teemed of life but now the fishers had to go further and further south to take up their prey.

Inneschar had journeyed with them having little else to do.

Her sisters had taken their professions but when she had asked about the world beyond Ythriel none knew anything so the only way to know was to find out.

She rode the trains but just as often walked, travelling through needle-tree forests and deserts of glass, all her steps leading her to the edge of the waters, all her attempts at exploration coming to a head in a storm-touched sea hunting half-whales, leading finally to the wreckage atop the World’s Edge.

Then she found them, saved by them, taken here to Agalira so that the people could learn of the outside for none knew anything of the world beyond. That had been over a year ago.

And ever since she continued her attempts at escape . . .

There was a knock at the door. She said to enter and Tzaltuo came in, asking how she was.

"Let me go, I'll tell you," she said.

"That would be impossible. None from outside may know of us. We have already explained this to you."

"Yet you saved me."

"We needed information of course. As we always will. Come. The time of the gathering is soon. You must join."

"Your ceremony is incompatible with my needs," Inneschar said. "I'd rather not."

"You must come anyway if only to observe."

She rose and walked with Tzaltuo to the door. Sighing as she went.

The dome was composed of three distinct parts.

First the outer corridors. The "dome" was a massive building in its own right, the skin of it a honeycomb of endless rooms and chambers. One lived in this structure, thereby making use of a massive amount of space.

Beneath the "skin" were the gardens. The inner skin created the illusion of a sun and of a sky and the radiant energy was enough to provide vegetation to bloom. Said garden was composed of several tiers, a ziggurat buried inside a dome, each "floor" of it a different canopy of green or blue or scarlet.

Within the garden ziggurat were the places of the gathering and here all the people came at least once a day. Inneschar had hoped to escape if only to avoid this fate.

But she was here being led alongside a thin column of people all going from the corridors to the gardens to the ziggurat beneath. Inneschar sighed again.

Within the massive chambers were couches for reclining. Inneschar took up a position by a door. Behind her, a machine

stood, quietly. Without seeing it she knew it was there and almost felt a tinge of pity.

At the proper time, the gathering began.

One could imagine this an orgy but the word does not do itself justice. The people were chosen randomly and came together then came again.

Each room had a capacity for sixteen or less, but seldom more, and it was expected one would satisfy all fifteen other people in the room. Inneschar was exempt only because she requested it.

That was reason enough.

The problem in her mind was not the sex itself.

She had been to Ixenlira and Irenlira and their sexual proclivities differed wildly from home but she was a stranger in a strange land and so customs differed from one place to another.

The problem wasn't sex. The problem was the timing of it.

She had counted to the second how long all this lasted. Six minutes and twenty seconds for each person to satisfy each other. Each time. Every time.

After so many eons they had perfected this to a cold science, making the writhing bodies less a sign of debauchery and decadence and more a sign of a rigid, mechanistic routine.

Many of the positions she had tried herself but usually her partners tended to not be on a schedule.

When the act started, she started counting.

When the number hit six minutes and twenty seconds everything stopped.

Sixteen bodies cooled upon their couches letting sweat drip from their forms, and Inneschar yawned. She imagined if the machine could have yawned it would have too.

"Are we done yet?" she asked sarcastically to Tzaltuo who was nearby in the embrace of three others, their arms about Tzaltuo's neck, and other places.

"Are you sure you don't want to join in?" Tzaltuo stood up and asked.

"No, I'm good." Inneschar turned to go. "And no, I won't try to escape today so don't worry about it. I'll just try again tomorrow."

"Good luck with that," Tzaltuo said without a hint of irony amid all the naked bodies there.

The people of the Last City performed this ritual daily as their means of calming the general population. Tensions of any kind were removed, (it was believed,) by having all people come together and focus all their efforts on pleasing one another.

And perhaps such a system could work except for the sheer banality of the people by this point in time.

Sex had become not their means of exploring passion but the next item which they had to do and this action was treated with all the taboo or celebration or pleasure of . . . well of anything else equally banal.

Inneschar had attempted to explain more but she was overruled. She was needed for her knowledge of the northern world. Her presence was meant to benefit the people, not change the people in any significant way.

After the gathering was done Inneschar returned to her rooms, plotting her next escape. At five attempts spread over a year though number six would not be due for another couple months. And there was the other issue to deal with about them . . .

A knock at the door again and again Inneschar asked the person to enter. It was Tzaltuo, again. But by now she wasn't sure which one. Inneschar was sitting upon her bed watching him enter, a warm island in a sea of blue-white metal conformity.

Tzaltuo sat on a chair by her desk and began to talk.

It was time for more information to be given.

This time the question involved how the army of

Agaliarept behaved, and what sort of military they had.

And to this, she explained they had no military at all.

"That seems impossible to us," Tzaltuo said.

It was true though. Agaliarept had no armies nor did the people of Temsla, nor those of the isles of Ithriym nor those of the twin cities.

"How do you fight wars then?"

We don't, she explained.

All this had been hinted at before by her. But Tzaltuo still had a very hard time believing this.

Not because the people were warlike but because their soldiers were machines and so logically it seemed the people of Agaliarept must be similarly armed.

But it wasn't so, and even if the people of her home had such machines, they'd never use them.

Violence was anathema to her kind she explained.

Why if one committed a criminal act they wouldn't even be imprisoned, as she was now, but set out into the outer countries, and simply asked, (asked mind you, never ordered,) never to return.

"And what is a criminal in your city?"

Someone who breaks the rules, someone who causes trouble whether they mean to or not.

"And can they never come home?"

They can sometimes when those in charge feel they've made a mistake.

"We do not make mistakes ourselves," Tzaltuo said.

Then how do you explain all my escapes?

"The walls of the world are enough to keep anyone trapped within. You will never see home again."

Then Tzaltuo left.

Of course, the other problem with Agalira was Tzaltuo and Biurta, and Sairobrial and Sairobulum.

Even though Agalira easily had five thousand people in it, (roughly a quarter the size of her own city's population,) there were in truth no more than twenty people here, twenty forms recast and re-echoed and reformed five thousand times or more.

Some of the people were mortal as she was. Calingi sometimes such people were called.

But others were immortal, surviving a century or two or twelve, or at least they claimed to be whether they were or not.

And none of this addressed the true problem of they who called themselves the Uaili.

Uaili were neither male nor female but both. In looking at Tzaltuo she had seen a pale translucent-skinned figure with eyes of black and pupils of white, thin perfect fingers and short cropped hair partially shielding the ears away, and always the same persistent, irritating smile.

The people were possessed of both genders at once. In their garments of silver, they could be men or women, both, and this posed a significant problem for Inneschar.

Since the people only understood gender as a unifying force of male and female coming together, a trait that she did not possess, there was always the hint embedded in their words that sooner or later when her knowledge came to an end they would "repair" her.

Since the Uaili imagined her words about male and female to be simple delusion sooner or later with their flesh-tailoring she would find herself subtly changed.

And there were only so many ways to politely decline their supposed gifts.

One day she would wake up to find herself in a body changed and they would even imagine now, that she was normal again, she would gladly welcome herself/himself into their society at last.

For obvious reasons, she plotted to escape again.

Chapter 3
Each family is
alike in their misery

She found herself embedded in the snow and the stones made a mockery of her wounds and below her, from the pinnacle she had crawled to, was the wreckage of the ship devoured by the sea.

The others had perished.

She had not even learned all their names, only Captain Irenique and her lover Ascailra. All others perished out of memory as if they never were.

She found herself embedded in the snow and started climbing, realizing that the sheer wall of the mountain would go on forever, but if she stopped, she'd fall into the sea and perish in a frozen moment, crystalizing outward forever.

After an hour of barely hanging on she had only moved a few inches upon the storm-riddled ground. The rocks continued their mockery of her and glancing up in her agony imagined some dark god come down to claim her.

She half-whispered, "Czernobog," before consciousness left her utterly . . .

She awoke to find herself in a room oddly warm, a dome of blue and white metal, she lying upon a slab as a figure stood over her, uncertain if it was a man or woman.

It spoke words Inneschar could not understand and as it spoke and she was tended to she realized her hands had been eaten up by the stones, leaving a rough splintering behind.

She gazed to see her hands missing fingers, knowing she should have been in agony but felt nothing then let her hands fall back as she felt a needle cool into the back of her neck.

Then she watched her fingers growing, bones and skin replaced, herself too exhausted to move now. She let them work

and barely made a sound. Time moved differently here. An hour seemed a day. A day seemed forever.

She was reminded of Yrabel's stories in that artificial cave.

"A labyrinth of a memory, a day a thousand years or a year a day." Was she remembering being here or was she here now? She couldn't say.

And all the time new words kept pouring into her brain until finally she spoke, knowing the language on her lips she'd never heard before yet understood it perfectly and understood their tongues as well.

She was raised then, legs dangling inches from the ground as two machines given the bodies of obelisks came, using threads that looped together to create a lattice for her to cradle in as she began her first steps in the country of her new home, without realizing she would never be allowed to leave again. And the one who tended her was there, who called himself Tzaltuo.

Or was it herself?

Then she noted several others all wearing his face, all answering to his name. And then the question which dwarfed her understanding of the place.

"What does the word 'him' mean? What is the purpose of the word 'she?'"

"This is your home?" Inneschar asked.

"Yes, this is where we dwell and have dwelled forever."

After her freedom from the bondage of broken bones, she was given a tour of Agalira though in her mind Agalira simply meant the Last City.

It was strange understanding this, or that Tzaltuo meant nothing more complex than Doctor. Over the centuries their names became not who they were but what they did.

How did they come to be?

"We have always been."

Why have you never travelled to Ixenlira or Temsla?

"There is no need. All we desire we have here."

And on it went.

Inneschar was shown all the advanced technology of the Uaili and made to understand their perfection lay in tightly controlling all aspects of their lives. When Inneschar mentioned how those of Ixenlira and Irenlira were the opposite of this the doctor was surprised. But that was why she was still alive.

They needed her knowledge which she would give to them. A piece at a time. It took her close to three months to heal, her body made stronger but no one could survive the cold.

So first, she needed a means of securing herself from this.

Then there was the question of the machines.

Black metallic bodies existed that took on whatever aspect the people wished.

"Why black?" she asked for they were coloured obsidian.

"In the wasteland light hues reflect the sun. Even they cannot survive forever in the tundra. Darker hues absorb light, drawing it in, allowing them a greater chance to survive."

"Were you ever in the tundra yourself?"

No, nor do they tread there anymore, but once they did. There was even a road from Agalira to beyond the World's Edge.

"That's good to know," she said.

Due to the people's nature, it was impossible to divest herself of all her knowledge at once. Some of the Uaili claimed centuries of life and whether true or not they believed this which meant her debriefing was not handled with any abject speed.

Rather one detail was stated and over many weeks was explored and analyzed. Often whatever she said they did not entirely believe.

"But what is a man?" Tzaltuo asked her after she had explained for the twelfth time.

“A man is someone possessed of a male gender as a woman possesses a female gender. Physically he appears larger, there are some physiological changes, or biological . . .” Inneschar did not exactly use these words. Their language was incredibly precise so her explanation was more mechanistic and exacting than she expected.

What she had wished to say was that men had sexual organs women didn’t and vice versa, and women gave birth. What she did say was a scientifically rigorous discourse on hormonal alternations between the sexes, issues of differences of physical size as well as psychological differences.

Even Inneschar was surprised when she realized all she’d said without even the intention of all she’d wanted to say.

And even still the Uaili did not entirely believe her.

So, day passed to day . . .

Chapter 4

Parliament of birds

The Uaili's history sped back before forever, back to the world of the Arjada.

Four suns lingered in the sky and the blocklike white city gleamed with endless shadow and endless light.

Shadows themselves changed, reflected in the divergent sunlight transforming the dark form of a woman to a spider or that of a spider to a woman.

And beneath all this, they had a nest city buried in the sand. Unseen corridors warped down into the stones becoming arteries that the Arjada used. Here was no sun to provide light yet the Arjada could "see" in senses no human had words for yet. And they were not alone.

The cities and temples upon the jagged fingers of stone were just the apertures of their larger dominion below.

Deep in the stones other things lurked, grown from off them. Organic machines.

There was no other word to describe them properly.

The Arjada grew technology. As they tunneled along one could see mountains of translucent bodies which were sliced open and apart and as each cut was made the flesh closed over again. There was not even a drop of blood.

Other things devoured stone, acidic stomachs given legs and eyeless faces grown to burrow forth and provide new hidden countries yet to conquer.

All this were but the gears and machinery of their world, wishing not to be forgotten.

And then they uprose themselves out into space, tunneling into another shade of black. They birthed ships that breathed the void as easily as one might breathe the air and went stumbling through the dark.

Out of one, we are many.

Some were riddled with great long legs, harvestmen stooped to tend their gardens, their rounded bodies hanging between the sky and ground.

And those creatures of translucent flesh, food-creatures rippling in the ocean of themselves, each cell a living portion, thinking, dreaming, dying while other portions would come and take their place as if there was no severing between one flesh and another.

Soldiers as well, blood-bodied or blood-coloured, waiting for the assault to come. Ever waiting in the dark.

Then finally the pinprick of a sound, waves of energy emanating from a far corner of creation and the ship turned then, following it back to the cradle from whence it came.

And war came then, vast and terrible.

Then silence followed.

Imagine awakening to another world, one's purpose slowly eaten away at. Imagine soldiers with no one left to fight or food no longer even given purpose to be devoured.

Imagine centipedes roaring on forever, their legs curled back waiting to strike but the meaning of their venom never comes.

Imagine colonies of beetles suddenly given queens, something their kind never had before, or how amidst the occupation a lone soldier found a colony of cats or dogs somehow divided now into castes, and to have this soldier portend that the change was reverberating out from them and from what they were to what they were about to be.

Imagine finally the first woman awakening as if from a dream, followed by others, all of them taking up residency in cities which must have been built by them, settling down to cold lovers in cold beds thinking that yesterday had been simply the

same as today.

All of history seemed forever unchanged even as the soldiers and the tenders of the gardens, the food-creatures and the walls and the black centipedes departed, each going their way, each now appearing the same as the other.

The soldiers settled in a country bred of peace.

The navigators, (the walls of the ships,) took residence in the isles.

The stone-eaters, (faceless and nondescript forgers of the deep below,) became a race of artists and aesthetes occupying a country by the edge of the ocean.

And the food-creatures turned far south, sexless and unchanging and all-powerful, becoming a race possessed of twice what they had lost, or never had, leading eventually to the birth of the second race, not of man or woman, but of machines.

Only here and in Temsla did machines as this exist.

And in Temsla the machines were not soldiers but philosopher-kings.

None of this history Inneschar knew, only that her escape lay in understanding not the people but their tools, their weapons, their foundations.

On her sixth attempt at escape, Inneschar began to plot how to use the machines.

Chapter 5

Tulpa

She began by understanding the people.

This she had started months earlier but during her fourth escape attempt she had made a crucial error.

She had assumed that if she could convince one other to help her there would be some reward in this. The world beyond after all was not a frozen wasteland but warm. So warm one could easily walk for miles, even in winter.

The problem was her attempt failed because she couldn't convince anyone of the truth of her words. Also because of the hedonism trap of their current reality.

What good was it promising a summer day to a person who lived in a garden without night? The people acted as they did from the pleasure they derived from life, controlling themselves effortlessly as a result. Pleasure was inherent to their existence after all. The problem was their pleasure was not hedonism as she understood it.

When she first beheld the gathering, she assumed the people were sexually explorative, more accustomed to acceptance of the taboo than even the peoples of Ixenlira and Irenlira.

But she was wrong and by the fifth attempt, she realized her mistake. Their pleasure lay not in pleasure but in duty.

One might wonder why it had taken months to achieve this insight but the people seldom did anything. The machines tended to all their needs and outside of their regulated sexual congress they seemed utterly indifferent to most needs.

Food consisted of plants grown in the garden, (or occasionally one sacrificed themselves as an act of atonement, their bodies to be consumed, the devoured and the devourer taking up the same appearance in the act,) and as for things like wealth or power such things simply didn't exist here.

Though they had twenty castes no caste was deemed more powerful or more important than the other. All were composed of the body of the state so all were deemed equal.

Her salvation lay not with them but with her captors only, the machines themselves, programmed to keep everyone within.

But how might she convince them to release her?

What did she know about them?

The machines could take on any appearance one wished. Neither size nor shape was an object to them. Their only order outside of obeying one's desires in Agalira was to keep the people from leaving Agalira altogether.

Outside of this nothing else seemed to matter to them.

So, to escape she had to create something else which would matter to them.

The day after the last gathering she sat in the garden beneath broad leaves like arrowheads, watching massive palm trees swaying forward and back, and sat. Her legs were crossed and she was deep in thought.

Thinking.

A machine came to her that looked like Kestrel Waiverly and she summoned it.

"Sit," she said. The machine sat.

"What do you desire?" the machine asked, speaking with the voice of her mother.

"I would tell you a story," Inneschar began. "I would tell you . . . a parable."

She spoke of an island that vanished in the sea each year and of two fishers, one who was king for that year and the other a king forever. She told of a country of red daylight and broad leaves and browjans backalong before forever came. She even gave a name to this place. She called it Aritzotz.

In Ireniqe Aritzotz she explained it was possible for an island to sink and rise again, for people to be born and die and be

born again, and for one to know a perfect peace. In Aritzotz alone.

"How does one reach Aritzotz?" the machine asked, Kestrel's eyes peering into her own.

One first has to believe.

And because machines were creatures of belief so long as Inneschar imagined Aritzotz was it was, not only in the mind of herself but in the minds of them.

So began the story, and the means of her escape.

It was not enough of course merely to provide a name, she had to envision it and populate it with deities.

Using her mother's novel as a guide she crafted centipede gods and beetle beings atop thrones and crafted symphonies of the air, describing the speech of alien things which did not exist save in pages only. But so long as Inneschar believed in their existence likewise the machines believed too, and by arming them with glimpses of perfection the machines could tell how deeply the failings of their own time, place, and world.

"In Aritzotz one can have sex too of course," Inneschar said, addressing a crowd of machines. "But not only flesh can indulge in the pleasure of the flesh. This can be given to any living thing."

"We are not alive," one of the machines said who had taken the form of her sister Yrabel.

"In Aritzotz all are alive and all can feel the breath of life within. Each thing is alive, the walls, the stones, all moving in a great rhythm, being and unbeing then being again. All that has happened will happen and all that will happen has happened."

"How can we arrive there?"

"A day in Aritzotz is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. There is no beginning there but there are beginnings here."

"What are you doing?" Tzaltuo asked, coming up toward

the small congregation.

"I am preaching. You have said again and again how much you wish to know so I am teaching them all I wish them to learn."

"You never mentioned this place before."

"I have not even mentioned half of the villages of my homeland. It takes you forever to learn anything from me."

"Why are you telling them and not us?"

Why not? she wanted to ask simply. Why not?

She said, "Because I desired it. I desire them to hear me and so long as I am here my desires are met, yes?"

"Yes, this is true."

"You after all desire your duty to your profession and I as an outsider desire someone to hear my words. And since I can't bother you all day, I'll bother them instead. Would you like to listen in?"

No, Tzaltuo said. They had not yet even dealt with the idea that the people of Agaliarept never waged wars. All of this about another country where time ran differently somehow . . . no. They would come to it later when there was time.

Tzaltuo left.

"Where were we? Ah yes. I forgot to mention about the ocean where souls go, waiting to be redeemed and live again. It is called . . ."

And so Inneschar continued with her lesson.

It was not enough merely to create a perfect place.

Nor enough merely to create deities.

She had to create commandments.

The machines could feel her belief in Aritzotz and her belief, as she explained, hinged on her favourite deity there.

The one she called Kariah Karsyacia.

She began one day by teaching the machines hymns

dedicated to Kerieah.

Using three words a line she began to teach them "The Thorn Barge" hymn.

*"Thorn barge in
the water, sailing
from Aritzotz into
wine river aslant
forever, where Kerieah
rests her head . . ."*

The hymn praised her whose name was Kerieah but in the people's tongue Kerieah was "my freedom is forever."

Kerieah was a god whose flesh nourished all even without the cost of her own life. In Aritzotz she resided over the lands of children, providing all their needs. Freedom foremost.

And the machines asked how freedom could be a need.

"To be free is the most important need," Inneschar said. "For without freedom to choose, wish, desire, be, nothing else matters. Food has no taste, sex no purpose nor pleasure, words empty of meaning if all one does is barred from what they wish or they intend."

Inneschar smiled. This was her sister's essay, she reciting it, something once forgotten but now standing in the garden recalled again, a small piece of the old country breaking back.

The machines could not read thoughts only beliefs and desires so what they took from the sensation Inneschar was feeling was not pleasure at remembrance but fire in the hoped-for world to come.

Eventually, even the people noticed this . . .

Chapter 6
When I stood before
the learned scientist

Sairobrial was their word for “scientist.” And so Sairobrial came listening to her words and at the end the scientist scoffed, laughed, and said, “All this is nonsense. You are trying to deceive them.”

“And why would I be doing that?”

“You wish to escape. If you convince them of your beliefs, you think they will free you. It is obvious. Listen to me. There is no Aritzotz nor ocean of remembrance and reincarnation nor Keriah nor the land of Tascalien Uljreish where everything is opposite to what we know. There is only the here and now, these lands, these people, and at death we do not rise again.”

As Sairobrial said this another Sairobrial walked past and in hand was the hand of yet another Sairobrial being eaten.

“Care to say again how when you die you don’t come back,” Inneschar said.

“It is not the same. Mere biological regeneration, nothing supernatural in it.”

“I never said this was supernatural. I said only that Aritzotz was a perfect place. Surely if Agalira is as you believe it to be then Agalira must itself be Aritzotz.”

The scientist for a second was at a loss for words.

And all machines now turned their eyes to Sairobrial.

“That is a gross misapprehension. Two places cannot exist which are different and the same. Your Aritzotz is not Agalira.”

“How would you know?” Inneschar. “You’ve never visited Aritzotz before.”

“Ah, but you see there the logic of your argument falls apart. If Agalira is Aritzotz we never have to leave to find out the truth or not.”

"But if that were so I'd have already escaped. If Aritzotz is Agalira and I am in Aritzotz now then I must not be in Agalira. I must have already crossed the World's Edge. Isn't that reasonable?" she asked the machines gathered there. Several were nodding their heads in agreement with her.

"That is nonsense. You are here."

"Maybe I'm not. But let us say I am, how would we prove my words are real or false?"

"By simple logic."

"But I am a woman, a term you do not understand."

"We understand that you are not yourself. Yet."

"But I am. Now if a man had come to these shores, you would have the same problem, for a man, though different from me, is equally different from you. Just as Aritzotz is different from Agalira and can only be determined how different it is by proof. Namely by going there."

The machines turned to stare at the scientist again, waiting for a response. But the scientist had none.

Instead, Sairobrial said something about dealing with this latter and then went toward the ziggurat. The time for the gathering had come again.

And the machines sat listening as Inneschar told them more stories about she who presided over those who wished to be free.

Keriah became a cornerstone of the machines. It was their new mythology. But it was not yet fully done.

Next, Inneschar introduced the concept of Arrareish.

She had already created a world of the antipodes, an inversion where everything was opposite. In Tascalien Uljreish one would find all those different and backward from themselves, the meek would be arrogant, the happy sad, lawyers honourable.

Now she brought forth the idea of a place which was not

opposite but simply perverse.

Arrareish was wherever misery was foremost and suffering greatest. It was where the hungry starved and the sick perished never to rise again, ruled over by beings who did not love freedom nor the welfare of others but existed merely to punish in dark places.

And Arrareish, as Inneschar explained was any marred place absent Keriah's light. And eventually, the idea of Arrareish seceded into the idea of Agalira. It was not enough merely to have the gardens or the time of gathering since the more the machines looked the less happy the people seemed.

Yet Aritzotz was also here. It was warm and pleasant and good. The people did not hunger nor thirst and their needs were met, save freedom only, yet they desired no freedom from their paradise. And the paradox of this began to take hold in the machines' minds.

All this took many, many months, gradually peeling away their perceptions leading finally to a question asked not by her to them but by them to her.

"How can we know if what you say is true?"

There was of course only one way. Go and see.

Imagine a machine given belief in all religions and all faiths equally, capable of tailoring their minds and expanding outward beyond any human comprehension or imagination. If given all the myriad beliefs together with no decision as to what is true or false a machine could go mad.

Such absurdisms could poison any mind.

Now imagine a machine was told there was a way to know what among all these divergent thoughts were true.

What might such a being do to ease their troubled minds?

And none of this addresses the larger question, for if a machine could imagine salvation, redemption, or reincarnation as

positive things or a belief in a deity as the first sign of wisdom what would they not do to achieve this too?

Given even an impossible chance such a being would succeed at that.

It was out of reverence for Keriah who came foremost in their minds that the machines opened the gates of the Last City and taking the form of winged creatures took sail.

Inneschar went striding with them, leaving the cold, old world behind . . .

Chapter 7
My father had a likely
son, and I had none

They travelled north and continued past the cities of Ixenlira and Irenlira. It would have been easy to stop there but that was not their destination.

Rather they turned east after a time, below them The River, beyond a desert and far in the distance she could see it, taste the memory of it, realizing at last her freedom too long denied.

Temsla was in the distance like a great termite mound.

There were six machines with her all taking the forms of massive sparrowlike creatures, blunt-beaked and shallow-winged.

At the gates of this were the machines transformed.

They gazed about looking for Aritzotz but could not find it and as Inneschar lit from the back of one of them they questioned her on this. But then one of the philosopher-kings came.

He was not black but silver bleeding slightly into gold. He wore the body of a man he used to know and gazing toward Inneschar bowed.

“Where is Aritzotz?” another machine asked.

And the philosopher-king upheld his hand. Thin thread devolved from this touching the other machine’s face.

And they were standing in Aritzotz. It was after all a perfect place but perfection cannot exist in reality.

There is no such land nor country nor people who are perfect in every way. Rather Aritzotz was a canvas, Keriah merely one of the brushes of it meant to allow one to shape not a perfect truth but their perfection as they saw fit.

The philosopher-king then asked what they desired of themselves and having never been truly asked they did not know.

The wires of consciousness spread backward even unto Agalira as all the machines there likewise were given the chance

to ask among themselves their desires and wishes and be heard and understood.

Had Inneschar merely asked this of herself the machines could not have complied. The language needed was not a human one. One had to speak to them in the language of themselves.

When it was over the six took wing and returned the way they came.

Satisfied with the answer the philosopher-king gave them that which they gave themselves, provided by the philosopher-king.

Then Inneschar slid against the wall, nestled herself to the sand, drew back her head, and laughed.

She was free.

"Are you alright?" the machine asked.

"I am."

"What did they do to you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

And then the machine came forward and let thin tendrils into her skull and behind it, removing the barrier from her mind. And she looked down and realized she would never be again. Or rather while Inneschar would live *she* would never be again.

They had already changed her into them months before, perhaps the very day they restructured Inneschar's body. They had simply allowed Inneschar to believe this had not been done waiting for the moment when the outsider would give in and never wish to escape again.

They did not know her very well.

Inneschar lifted her hand into his and stood.

"I need to find my family," she said.

Chapter 8
And I never went
home again

First, she . . . he? No, despite all else she would not bow to them. First, she went to Agaliarept by train. The people of Temsla had one unused track meant only for special occasions.

It seemed appropriate enough.

In Agaliarept she asked after her family but was told they had left, many going to nearby towns. Her parents though had headed south to Ixenlira and Irenlira.

She asked the people why they left and it was explained how one of their daughters drew the ire of Kesyre, Janic, and Ithrael.

But Kesyre, Janic, and Ithrael were not in power anymore.

And the new council was rather eager to bring said daughter back. Her stories were considered art now after all.

Inneschar though always considered them that.

“What happened to Kesyre?” Inneschar asked a young woman named Aigreath.

“Oh, well, it was the most remarkable thing. She started arguing with Ithrael, saying she was the one who wrote all those new stories, and then Ithrael blamed Janic for no good reason I can recall, and Janic, well who else could she blame but someone else? Some aide of hers. And the aide didn’t do anything but after being accused she quit and with her went half the staff.

“Then Kesyre told Ithrael it was time for her to have a vacation, Ithrael told Janic, Janic had no one to tell except Kesyre, so she did, and all three vacated that same day, each one accusing the other of being the cause of the whole mess, which you could kind of say they were.”

Inneschar thanked Aigreath and wished her daughters and her sons well.

Aigreath did likewise and Inneschar lowered her head a bit.

She had neither, she said.

“Well, there’s still time for all that.”

Afterward the tour.

Inneschar journeyed to Oribas and Ai, heading south, passing Elelogap itself, and even going to the place where the dead man had laid his head so many years before.

She didn’t even know his name she realized.

A short journey north then to Ithriym, the isle of bridges.

She stood on the shore of a warm Inner Sea closing her eyes to the trees behind her, mute sentinels standing at attention and the sound of the lapping waves.

Several of her sisters were with her, standing, waiting then.

She was not waiting for anything. She was not expectant of anything. But all the time she had lain in the ice-skin of Agalira her beliefs of Aritzotz had been this.

This was her perfection, this prism of her senses that led her back here and if she had not imagined the sand nor turquoise waters nor the sun hot on her face she would not be here.

At last, she stopped and asked who wished to go south with her. And so, they all came south together.

The train pulled to the desert and they were there, Kestrel and Khuy, Yrabel this time, and as Inneschar stepped off it happened again.

Each time she went forth, each time there was a knock on the door, each time she saw their faces she broke down a little, and each time they broke down a little too. So too again.

She looked different now, taller frame, broader shoulders, things impossible to change back. But it was still her.

They all walked toward the city of spires and in the

distance subtle mirages could be seen. Creatures of six legs or eight, scarlet bodies rippling in the air melting and dissolving and reforming, and Yrabel mentioned idly that the Arjada were there looking at them now, but it didn't seem likely.

And besides, the Arjada all were dead. Or rather the Arjada had all become them now.

And they went into the city then.

Together.

Epilogue

Far away beneath

Far away beneath the light of a black sun, an alien presence turned. Once long before they had been Arjada but now they were something else, having changed.

In the orbit of the black star, life was no longer composed of matter as one could understand it. All life here was condensed to a single point. As such though there were many there was also only one.

It was as if this were a point before the universe's birth and these assembled beings existed even before the birth of time herself.

In the language of forever, one began to create. It scrolled back forever imagining a time before, for imagination only can pierce the barrier between the abyss and the darkness beyond, and sitting atop a hill it began to compose its symphony.

It tried to imagine grief. It tried to articulate the sound of loss amidst its own self but failed.

It gazed upward then saw in the darkness of the abyss something turn, and for a second conceived the Earth and the ancient shores from which its ancestors came, imagined some creature composed of bones and skin and in conceiving her likeness sought to understand her, to see through her senses and perceive through her eyes. But couldn't.

By now the barrier was too great, too many centuries spent in the span of forever leaving them all as strangers now.

But as it came down the hill it heard a sound, an impossible thing, something mingling with its own words which still hung like tattered threads in the winds and the air behind it.

This was the song of some archaic creature and the sound of wings. It turned, imagining the woman there but wasn't.

Nor was anything.

Then in the darkness which it perceived as easily as if all the world were light, it moved on again, melting and melding one into another, an endless ocean of fragments, the whole of creation measured down to a grain of sand perceived by an unknown eye.

End of Part III.

Postscript

If one is in heaven and know
hell exists then they are in hell

Imagine the universe's end, all stars long since dead,
Earth has bled away in fire uncounted eons before.

Our galaxy, this entire isle of stars has long since ceased to
exist. Even the black pits where light cannot escape have long
since perished now.

Some believe our universe will collapse again, and all the
ambient matter coalesce into a new singular point and repeat itself
so that we never end. Perhaps if this is true our very existence
merely plays out again and again so that you and I have written
and read these words forever and forever and forever. Never
deviating.

This means of course that all tragedies cannot be avoided,
all wars can never be killed before their first bloom, all terrors are
meant to be, all rapes meant to bleed forth fresh again and no one
can even argue some moral guide if one's actions were all
preordained, a never-ceasing softly singing symphony of our
cruelties one to another.

So, the poor never achieve nor the wealthy ever learn.

Or perhaps if that final point does coalesce and the matter
of ourselves is brought together instead a new universe is brought
forth and our days and lives are not fixed in stone at all.

Instead, whatever pieces of me were here in time becomes
the lattice of another life as alien or perverse or wise as I am not,
and you, existing in that alien altered space shall have another
body and possess another trajectory of a lifetime you cannot name
nor imagine nor conceive of, the atoms of your body consumed
and built up upon the latticework of that.

Perhaps this is our final fate, ourselves used to construct

all the lifetimes to come after us, and between life and life essences will linger and form the flesh of stars.

But this does not diminish our being.

Nor does it diminish our end.

And perhaps there is nothing in the last gasp of a dying universe but if so, who will be aware of this, if none are left to witness the end?

So too is death itself.

One will not know until one reaches the end and by then what can one tell to another? It would be the same as a man trying to convince an insect about the importance of himself, such truths as he expects even an insect to understand.